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Promotion and protection of human rights

Situation of human rights defenders

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution [52/4](#).

* [A/79/50](#).



Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Summary

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, highlights the contributions made by human rights defenders to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In the report, she demonstrates that, across every one of the 17 Goals, human rights defenders are placing human rights at the core of sustainable development and, in doing so, are assisting States in their responsibility to leave no one behind. The Special Rapporteur highlights that this work is being made more difficult by increasing restrictions on the right to defend rights.

I. Introduction

1. At the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development last year, the United Nations announced that only 15 per cent of the Sustainable Development Goals were on track and that a “fundamental shift in global behaviour” was necessary to deliver on the promise of the Goals.¹ Part of this fundamental shift must include a new appreciation for the integral role that human rights defenders play in helping States to meet the Goals, and a reversal in the increasing restrictions on the right to defend rights.

2. With over 90 per cent of the Sustainable Development Goal targets embedded in international human rights obligations,² it is evident that human rights are fundamental to development and that development is fundamental to the realization of human rights. Moreover, the interdependency of the human rights that ground each of the Goals makes it clear that they cannot be tackled in isolation. Poverty cannot be eliminated (Goal 1) without hunger being eliminated (Goal 2), neither of which can happen if lack of climate action (Goal 13) is causing new impoverishment and putting at risk life on land (Goal 15).

3. It is further evident that those who work to implement the Sustainable Development Goals do so in the service of human rights; they are human rights defenders and defenders of the Goals. They are putting into practice the first guiding principle of the Secretary-General’s call to action for human rights, namely to position “rights at the core of sustainable development”.³

4. As the Special Rapporteur outlines in the present report, human rights defenders are active in fulfilling each one of the Sustainable Development Goals, even if the work they are doing or their profile does not fit with commonly held assumptions regarding who is a human rights defender. Yet, in helping meet the Goal targets, they are protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights; their contribution warrants greater recognition and protection. By highlighting human rights violations, they are also very clearly signalling to Governments what is unsustainable, what is not inclusive and what is leaving people behind.

5. Indeed, human rights defenders bring a particular added value to this cross-cutting political commitment to “leave no one behind”.⁴ Their work is often rooted in the most marginalized of communities, they frequently act to redress great and unjust power imbalances and they have access to the parts of society that exist in the shadows. To this work, they bring experience with advocacy, knowledge of rights and networks of contacts.

6. While some States clearly value the contribution that human rights defenders make in helping them meet the Sustainable Development Goals, the Special Rapporteur finds it incomprehensible that so many others prevent them from doing this work. As outlined below, human rights defenders are threatened, criminalized, attacked and killed for peacefully furthering progress in achieving the Goals, which all 193 States Members of the United Nations have agreed to try to achieve.

7. The Special Rapporteur urges States to regard those exercising their right to defend rights and promote the Sustainable Development Goals as crucial allies as part of a wider joint venture to reduce inequality, eradicate discrimination and reach the furthest behind first.

¹ United Nations, “Only 15 per cent of global development goals on track, as multiple factors stall, hamper, reverse inclusive and sustained development, Third Committee stresses”, 28 September 2023.

² United Nations Development Programme, “Governance: human rights for sustainable development”.

³ United Nations, “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights” (2020).

⁴ See <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>.

II. Methodology

8. A formal request for submissions for the present report was sent to States, national human rights institutions, businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights defenders on 13 May 2024. Some 87 responses were received from 41 countries.

9. The Special Rapporteur thanks in particular the Governments of Armenia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Italy, North Macedonia and Qatar, which were the only six States to respond to her request for input.

10. The present report is not intended to be exhaustive and relies mainly on inputs received during the consultation process. The Special Rapporteur notes that the cases highlighted in the report represent only a small sample of the work human rights defenders are doing in support of a small sample of Sustainable Development Goal targets.

III. Legal framework

11. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all States Members of the United Nations in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership. In the Goals, it is recognized that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand in hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth, all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. Every four years, the high-level political forum on sustainable development meets under the auspices of the General Assembly, known as the Sustainable Development Goals Summit.

12. The Sustainable Development Goals are not legally binding; however, States are expected to take ownership and establish a national framework for achieving them. Countries have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review at the national, regional and global levels with regard to the progress made in implementing the Goals and targets by 2030.

13. At the same time, when working to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, countries remain bound by their obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the relevant binding international human rights standards, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

A. Sustainable Development Goal 1 (no poverty)

14. Central to the goal of ending poverty is reaching those most at risk of being marginalized. This risk is especially high in countries where acts such as the non-payment of debts or loitering are criminalized. This serves to further stigmatize those living in poverty and worsens prison overcrowding.

15. In 2017 in Sierra Leone, the NGO AdvocAid initiated a campaign to “decriminalize poverty”, having found that those most susceptible to jailing as a result of petty offences, including loitering laws, were street traders, persons engaged in sex work and prostitution and those already living in poverty. A disproportionate number of those affected were women.

16. Moreover, the organization found that when such women were forced to spend time in prison, they emerged with lost earnings, leaving them even less able to look after themselves and their families and to repay their debts. In 2022, AdvocAid submitted a case to the Economic Community of West African States Community Court of Justice, arguing that “these laws and their application unfairly target the poor and most vulnerable members of society and subject them to criminal sanctions for potential, rather than actual, harmful acts”.⁵ The case is ongoing.

17. The interlinked and interdependent nature of the Sustainable Development Goals and the importance of an enabling environment for human rights defence to achieve the Goals was noted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in a 2023 report to the Human Rights Council. He described how people, especially peasants and Indigenous Peoples, were forced into poverty by “being pushed off and denied access to their land and territory” (A/HRC/52/40). In this respect, human rights defenders who organize peaceful resistance to land grabbing of their community’s lands can also be seen as playing a role in preventing impoverishment.

18. Furthermore, land grabbing is frequently accompanied by deforestation, illegal mining, pollution of the environment and a host of other interrelated impacts that undercut many Sustainable Development Goals, including Goals 3 (good health and well-being), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 10 (reduced inequalities), 13 (climate action) and 15 (life on land).

19. Movimiento Ríos Vivos, a human rights movement in defence of territories in the department of Antioquia in Colombia, has for over a decade been exposing the negative human rights impacts that the development of the Hidroituango dam is having on thousands of families who live there. This has included forced evictions, floods, landslides, deforestation and a lack of fair compensation.⁶ As a result of their activism, human rights defenders from the movement have been threatened, assaulted, intimidated, slandered, surveilled, subjected to death threats⁷ and killed,⁸ while fishers, farmers and traditional artisanal miners have all lost their livelihoods due to the impacts of the construction, leaving them in a situation of “poverty and underdevelopment”.⁹ The company contracted to develop the project, Empresas Públicas de Medellín (Medellin Public Enterprises), did not respond to the allegations of threats against human rights defenders in a communication sent to it by special procedures in 2020.¹⁰

⁵ Advocaid, “Court case filed against Sierra Leone to overturn discriminatory loitering laws”, 4 May 2022.

⁶ Submission from the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders.

⁷ See communication COL 2/2020, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25103>.

⁸ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (see www.business-humanrights.org/es/%C3%BAltimas-noticias/colombia-denuncian-asesinatos-de-opositores-a-represa-hidroituango-de-epm-la-empresa-niega-cualquier-v%C3%ADnculo).

⁹ Movimiento Ríos Vivos, “Declaration of communities affected by the IDB group”, 10 August 2020.

¹⁰ See communication OTH 11/2020, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25104>.

B. Sustainable Development Goal 2 (zero hunger)

20. As Sustainable Development Goal 2 is closely linked to Goal 1, human rights defenders make particular contributions to meeting targets 1¹¹ and 3¹² of Goal 2 in helping to address hunger.

21. The Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand consists of 350 member families across five communities in Surat Thani Province and advocates for reform of a deeply inequitable land distribution system. The Federation's focus on food sovereignty and the creation of community-led sustainable food systems left it well equipped to deal with the food shortages that occurred during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Managed by women in the community, the Federation had placed emergency supplies of rice in storage for such an event, ensuring that community members did not go hungry during the crisis. Furthermore, in 2022 the Federation started growing organic produce to supply local school districts with nutritious food for their students while also benefiting small- and medium-sized farmers in the community.¹³

22. The Federation's work challenging inequitable land distribution and empowering the poor has led to its members being threatened, criminalized, intimidated and killed. Over 10 years ago, the special procedures sent a communication documenting the killing of two women human rights defenders from the Federation.¹⁴ Unfortunately, little seems to have changed since then with regard to the risks they face. At least one additional member of their community has been killed¹⁵ and other members continue to face threats, harassment and intimidation.

23. As the Special Rapporteur documented in her previous report to the General Assembly (A/78/131), human rights defenders, in particular women, play crucial roles in conflict, post-conflict and crisis situations, often stepping into the gaps where the State is unable or unwilling to provide services to the civilian population. Food insecurity is a common consequence of conflict¹⁶ and one which human rights defenders organize to address, often at great risk.

24. Amid the ongoing catastrophic war in the Sudan, which has created the largest internal displacement crisis in the world,¹⁷ a breakdown in State services has seen women human rights defenders draw on their networks and experience to provide food security to some of the most vulnerable people in the country. They established local kitchens and, without access to international food aid and often at great risk, provided sustenance to over 250,000 families in Khartoum for nearly a year.¹⁸

¹¹ By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.

¹² By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, Indigenous Peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.

¹³ Submission from Protection International – Thailand.

¹⁴ See communication THA 1/2013, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=21169>.

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "UN Human Rights Office welcomes progress on Thai enforced disappearance case, urges government to do more", 13 November 2019.

¹⁶ Marie Haga, "Breaking the vicious circle of hunger and conflict" (United Nations).

¹⁷ International Organization for Migration, "Sudan's internally displaced persons 2023 estimates".

¹⁸ Submission from Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa.

25. In Gaza, where, at the time of writing, the “threat of famine [has] never loomed larger”,¹⁹ 80 per cent of women surveyed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) reported relying on food assistance as their primary source of food. Seventy per cent stated that they had experienced “weight loss in the last 30 days and more than half experience[d] dizziness often”.²⁰ Here, too, human rights defenders have tried to contribute to meeting this need by arranging the delivery of food supplies. Some of those doing this work have been killed by the Israel Defense Forces, including seven members of the NGO World Food Kitchen.²¹ Despite these risks, the work has continued and, by June 2024, the NGO had delivered 50 million meals to Palestinians in Gaza in eight months.²²

C. Sustainable Development Goal 3 (good health and well-being)

26. Access to quality health-care services, a key target of Sustainable Development Goal 3, frequently remains beyond the reach of people for a variety of reasons, including their ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, profession and nationality status. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when large swathes of the population did not benefit from equal access to vaccines, health-care information and medical assistance. In response, human rights organizations and defenders took seriously the mantra of “leaving no one behind” and set up services to respond to neglected populations. Funding for such organizations is crucial to their survival, and government recognition of this fact is welcome. In 2023 in the Dominican Republic, over 40 per cent of the budget for non-profit organizations was allocated to NGOs working on Goal 3.²³ Qatar reported that it was the first country in which all municipalities received the title of Healthy City from the World Health Organization.

27. The Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion notes how stateless persons were one of the populations most at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although already marginalized, they “faced even greater, life-threatening marginalization, with potentially disastrous consequences”.²⁴ The Institute created a COVID-19 emergency statelessness fund to direct resources to human rights defenders working with stateless communities to help address some of the impacts on them. In Bangladesh, one such recipient was the human rights organization Council of Minorities, which promotes the rights of Urdu-speaking formerly stateless persons in slums and camps throughout the country.²⁵ Through the Council’s outreach work, over 11,000 people were instructed on appropriate sanitation steps and precautionary measures, which resulted in them “beginning to actively use [personal protective equipment] and maintain social distancing”. An additional almost 600 people were directly assisted in obtaining COVID-19 vaccinations.²⁶

¹⁹ World Food Programme (WFP), “Gaza updates: WFP responds to hunger crisis as Rafah incursion cuts access to warehouse”, 17 May 2024.

²⁰ UN-Women, “Gender alert: voices of strength – contributions of Palestinian women-led organizations to the humanitarian response in the Occupied Palestinian Territory”, June 2024.

²¹ OHCHR, “Occupied Palestinian Territory/Israel: vital need to ensure humanitarian aid and protect humanitarian workers”, 5 April 2024.

²² World Central Kitchen, “50 million meals served in Gaza”, 4 June 2024.

²³ Submission from the Government of the Dominican Republic.

²⁴ Submission from the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion.

²⁵ See www.com-bd.org.

²⁶ COVID-19 Emergency Statelessness Fund Consortium, “Together we did! A reflection on the impact of the COVID-19 Emergency Statelessness Fund (CESF) Consortium”, p. 14.

28. Environmental defenders around the world have repeatedly demonstrated their contribution to target 9 of Sustainable Development Goal 3, which calls for “substantially reduc[ing] the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination”. While many of these defenders work in communities that suffer negative human rights impacts from development projects, they are also found among fisherfolk who seek to prevent the use of chemicals in the fishing industry.

29. In Ghana, fish mammies, entrepreneurial women working in artisanal fishing,²⁷ are closely involved in ocean governance. Many have started testing fish for contamination at landing beaches before paying fishers for the catches. One told researchers from One Ocean Hub that she pours water on the fishes and waits for about 10 minutes. If the water turns black and not reddish, it means they were caught using chemicals such as dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and Dynamite.²⁸ A worldwide ban on DDT for agricultural use came into effect under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants in 2004 due to its negative effects on human health. Other fish mammies examine the underside of the fishes’ gills to assess whether chemicals were used in catching them.²⁹

D. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education)

30. Poverty is one of the “most obstinate” barriers to education, while political instability, conflict, natural disasters and ethnic status also contribute to reduced educational opportunities for children.³⁰ Children living in conflict- and crisis-affected areas are among those most likely to be denied the right to education, although significant efforts are being made by human rights defenders to help realize this right.

31. Between February 2020 and February 2022, public schools were closed in Myanmar as a result of both the pandemic and the 2021 military coup. By the time the military directed schools to reopen, nearly 30 per cent of the teaching staff had been fired for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. When schooling restarted, there had been a dramatic decline in enrolment. According to the World Bank, the number of students enrolled in secondary-level education dropped by 17 percentage points in rural areas and 31 percentage points in urban areas. It warned that the loss of learning could risk “a generational loss of human capital in Myanmar”.³¹

32. Groups of human rights defenders involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement responded by opening schools in parts of the country not under the control of the military junta. One such group is the Ta’ang Land Education Council in northern Shan State. For the 2023/24 academic year, the Council opened and operated 381 schools, employing 1,650 teachers drawn from the ranks of the Movement to provide an education to 28,000 students.³² Due to the risk of aerial attack from the military junta, the Council worked with each of the schools to develop risk management strategies and conducted training sessions for teachers on responses to airstrikes.

33. Human rights defenders are also challenging an ideological puritanism taking hold in education settings that undermines target 7 of Sustainable Development

²⁷ Ranita A Sandi, “The fish mammies of Sierra Leone”, *Yemaya*, No. 35 (November 2010).

²⁸ Submission from One Ocean Hub.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See www.unicef.org/education.

³¹ Sutirtha Sinha Roy and others, “A generation of children are at risk of learning losses in Myanmar” (World Bank Blogs, 24 October 2023).

³² Submission from a coalition of NGOs in Myanmar.

Goal 4.³³ The Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education, a countrywide network of over 300 groups and institutions, works to ensure that the education on offer in Brazil is public, of high quality, secular, inclusive and aligned with the values contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 2023, the Campaign published a mapping³⁴ of legislative proposals presented between 1989 and 2023 aimed at limiting the topics that could be taught in schools and universities, restricting academic freedom and encouraging the persecution of educators. It identified nearly 2,000 such legislative proposals, which included provisions for the firing of educators who did not adhere to the new restrictions. These legislative proposals often followed lobbying moves from pressure groups that encourage students, parents and educators themselves to report educators who have taught content such as gender equality, anti-racist content and environmental justice.³⁵

E. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality)

34. Gender disparities remain deeply entrenched, with over half the countries in the world lacking legislation to safeguard gender equality, including in marriage and divorce.³⁶ Women human rights defenders are initiating and leading campaigns to affect legislative change, to promote the equal rights of women and to resist the rollback of rights. However, as the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development highlights in its submission, “institutional and governance structures continue to fail in formally and financially recognizing and integrating their critical insights and efforts, resulting in gaps that undermine the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals”.³⁷

35. In Afghanistan, a system of gender apartheid has been imposed by the Taliban through a “tightly interwoven patchwork of written and verbal decrees, policies, and systematized practices with gender discrimination and mass oppression of women at their core”.³⁸ A ban on girls attending post-primary school has made Afghanistan the only country in the world where girls are prohibited from attending secondary school.³⁹ This ban has a negative impact on all facets of the human rights of girls and creates the conditions for multiple other violations. UN-Women has found that the ban is correlated with a 25 per cent increase in the rate of child marriage and a 45 per cent increase in the rate of early childbearing.⁴⁰

36. Human rights defenders in Afghanistan have responded to the attack on this foundational element of gender equality by setting up underground schools or ignoring the ban and continuing to provide education to girls in secret. One such school in Bamyan Province was forced to stop its programmes in October 2023 after being discovered by the Taliban intelligence department. Educational centres were also shut down in Ghazni, Daykundi and Herat Provinces for providing teaching to girls.⁴¹

³³ By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

³⁴ Mapeamento Educação sob Ataque. Available at <https://educacaosobataque.org>.

³⁵ Submission from the Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education.

³⁶ UN-Women and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023* (2023).

³⁷ Submission from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development.

³⁸ UN-Women, Afghanistan: Gender Country Profile 2024.

³⁹ OHCHR, “The world is failing 130 million girls denied education: UN experts”, 23 January 2023.

⁴⁰ UN-Women, Afghanistan: Gender Country Profile 2024.

⁴¹ Submission from Rawadari.

37. Despite the enormous risks, women human rights defenders in Afghanistan have engaged in public protests for gender equality, defying the attempts of the Taliban to erase them from public life. These protests have occurred in a number of cities, including Kabul, Faizabad, Herat and Mazar-e Sharif.⁴² In September 2023, Neda Parwan and Zholia Parsi, two women affiliated with the Spontaneous Movement of Afghan Women, were detained, likely for their participation in protests.⁴³ The two were released on 19 December 2023.

38. In 2022, the last year for which data were available, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recorded its highest yearly number of killings of women and girls in 20 years. Of the nearly 89,000 women and girls killed intentionally, over 48,000 were killed by intimate partners or another family member.⁴⁴ Following a spike in such killings in recent years in Kenya, women human rights defenders mobilized to convene nationwide protests in January 2024 against femicide to pressure the authorities to take concrete action. Feminists in Kenya, one of the co-organizers of the protests, also prepared legal teams on standby to respond to any potential arrests of protesters.

39. One of the campaign's demands was that the Director of Criminal Investigations should prioritize all suspected femicide cases for investigation. Research conducted by the Africa Data hub found that once a suspected perpetrator of the killing of a woman is arrested and brought to court, it takes more than five years on average for the case to be concluded.⁴⁵ At the end of January 2024, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations of Kenya issued a press release on Facebook stating that a team of investigators had been instructed to "expedite investigations on serious sexual offences and murder incidents involving women with a view to put to an end the worrying trend of femicide in the country".⁴⁶

40. Some Governments have also been working to address gender inequality. In North Macedonia, coordinators and deputy coordinators for equal opportunities have been appointed in all government ministries and tasked with implementing the national strategy for gender equality across governmental departments.⁴⁷

F. Sustainable Development Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation)

41. Human rights defenders play a pivotal role in monitoring the water supply and exposing incidents in which interference with water ecosystems results in human rights harms. These incidents often occur in the context of so-called development projects or industrial plants where the water supplies of communities living on or close to the sites are fundamentally altered.

42. In North Carolina (United States of America), residents living along the lower Cape Fear River have for years been chronically exposed to dangerous quantities of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) chemicals, released from the Fayetteville Works facility, a manufacturing plant currently owned by the Chemours Company LLC (Chemours), and previously owned by E.I. DuPont de Nemours (DuPont). PFAS chemicals are commonly known as "forever chemicals" because they do not degrade in the environment. The manufacturing plant has been discharging contaminated water into the Cape Fear River for over 40 years, while public

⁴² Amnesty International.

⁴³ OHCHR, "Taliban must immediately release women human rights defenders, say UN experts", 31 October 2023.

⁴⁴ UNODC, "Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide): global estimates of female intimate partner/family-related homicides in 2022" (2023).

⁴⁵ Africa Data Hub (see www.africadatahub.org/femicide-kenya).

⁴⁶ See www.facebook.com/UpeleleziKenya/posts/774058191423755/?_rdr.

⁴⁷ Submission from the Government of North Macedonia.

authorities have been unknowingly supplying this contaminated water to residents in the surrounding counties. PFAS pollution has also spread through the area's ecosystems, affecting fish, livestock and crops.⁴⁸ Peer-reviewed studies show a link between exposure to certain levels of PFAS and potential negative health impacts, including decreased fertility, developmental delays in children and increased risk of some cancers.⁴⁹

43. Clean Cape Fear,⁵⁰ a grass-roots collective of concerned residents, formed a local action group to seek redress and accountability for the contamination of their water, and to restore and protect the water supply. Clean Cape Fear, together with five other community groups, sued the United States Environmental Protection Agency for its failure to compel Chemours to fund critical health studies on 54 PFAS chemicals released from the Fayetteville Works site.⁵¹ In a special procedures press release in 2024, human rights experts raised concerns that “DuPont and Chemours appear to have impermissibly captured the Environmental Protection Agency and delayed its efforts to properly regulate PFAS chemicals”. Through the sustained advocacy of the National PFAS Contamination Coalition,⁵² made up of local grass-roots groups like Clean Cape Fear, a national and international issue has been made out of PFAS contamination of drinking water as these human rights defenders pursue their right to safe drinking water. The impact of their campaigning was evident in April 2024, when the Government of the United States issued a first-ever “national, legally enforceable drinking water standard to protect communities from exposure to harmful per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances”.⁵³

44. As pointed out in one submission received for the present report, damage to water ecosystems has been exacerbated by both the growth of mineral extraction to fuel the “green transition” and the “influence of private corporations and financial actors in water, development and climate governance and finance”.⁵⁴

45. In Honduras, the construction of a hydroelectric plant by the company Hidrocep on the Mezapa River threatened the supply of clean water to the communities of Pajuiles in the Nombre de Dios mountain range in Atlántida Department. In 2010, a concession for the exploitation of the river was granted by the National Congress of Honduras. No prior consultation was held with the affected communities, which first found out about the plant when the construction activities contaminated the river, which had been their main source of drinking water and irrigation for their crops.⁵⁵

46. When their appeals to the local authorities proved fruitless, human rights defenders in the community organized a peaceful protest camp at the worksite while also launching various legal challenges with the support of NGOs. This gave rise to unjust prosecutions of local human rights defenders, as noted by the Special Rapporteur's predecessor following a country visit to Honduras in 2018 (see [A/HRC/40/60/Add.2](#)). In March 2024, after seven years of objections, the country's Supreme Court recognized that the human rights of the communities of Pajuiles had

⁴⁸ See communication AL USA 26/2023, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28341>.

⁴⁹ United States Environmental Protection Agency (see www.epa.gov/pfas/our-current-understanding-human-health-and-environmental-risks-pfas).

⁵⁰ See www.cleancapefear.org.

⁵¹ Center for Environmental Health, “Lawsuit against EPA on PFAS testing petition moves forward in North Carolina federal court”, 15 June 2022.

⁵² See <https://pfasproject.net>.

⁵³ United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Biden-Harris Administration finalizes first-ever national drinking water standard to protect 100M people from PFAS pollution”, 10 April 2024.

⁵⁴ Submission from a human rights organization that wishes to remain anonymous.

⁵⁵ Submission from Lawyers Without Borders Canada.

been violated on account of the contamination of their water supply and ordered a suspension of the company's activities in the area.⁵⁶

G. Sustainable Development Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy)

47. Securing equitable access to energy, especially for those living in rural or isolated areas, or on the margins of society, can pose a significant challenge. Individual human rights defenders and organizations that work with underrepresented communities are well placed to help meet this challenge.

48. Indigenous human rights defenders have established projects to introduce renewable energy systems into their communities and to develop such systems while simultaneously drawing on Indigenous knowledge and advocating for the rights of Indigenous Peoples. One such initiative is CREATE Borneo, a village-based project in Malaysia that trains Indigenous engineers in renewable energy technology and cultivates Indigenous entrepreneurship while improving rural energy access in the country.⁵⁷ Similarly, in Uganda, human rights defenders have addressed the lack of access to reliable and affordable energy in rural areas by championing and raising awareness about community-based renewable energy projects. Initiated by grass-roots groups with the support of international NGOs, these projects are aimed at supplying clean energy alternatives, including biomass and solar power, to geographically marginalized communities.⁵⁸

49. As has been repeatedly stated, including in the political declaration adopted at the high-level political forum on Sustainable Development in September 2023, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is a “shared commitment” which involves “engaging all relevant stakeholders, including civil society”.⁵⁹ Yet, in States where the space for civil society is limited, this shared commitment is missing, and stakeholders with the expertise to assist States in advancing the Goals are instead silenced. In Viet Nam, the executive director of a renewable energy think tank, Thi To Nhien Ngo, was detained in September 2023 and charged with misappropriation of government documents.⁶⁰ Thi To Nhien Ngo has 20 years of expertise in the area of green energy, including 10 years of work as a consultant with the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the European Union.⁶¹ She is one of six influential figures working on climate change, all of whom advocated decarbonizing the energy sector of Viet Nam, to have been arrested since 2021.⁶²

H. Sustainable Development Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth)

50. The human rights defenders most commonly linked with Sustainable Development Goal 8 are those organizing to create, maintain and advocate for fair working conditions for and equal treatment of all workers, in line with target 8 of Goal 8.⁶³

⁵⁶ See <https://abyayalasoberana.org/noticias/honduras-corte-suprema-ordena-la-suspension-de-la-actividades-de-la-hidroelectrica-en-territorio-de-comunidades-pajuiles>.

⁵⁷ Submission from the Indigenous Peoples Major Group.

⁵⁸ Submission from the Africa Institute for Energy Governance.

⁵⁹ See General Assembly resolution 78/1, annex.

⁶⁰ Submission by Civics.

⁶¹ Ben Swanton and Michael Altman-Lupu, “Understanding the arrest of energy think tank chief Ngo Thi To Nhien”, Project88, 28 November 2023.

⁶² See OHCHR, “Viet Nam: detention of environmental human rights defender Hoang Thi Minh Hong”, 2 June 2023.

⁶³ Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers,

51. The Human Rights Defender's Office in Armenia has routinely stressed that the low awareness of labour rights among workers in that country exacerbates human rights violations in the workplace. The Office has run various awareness-raising campaigns, advises workers who complain to it on the protections to which they are legally entitled and plays a role in helping resolve labour conflicts.⁶⁴

52. Such defence of workers' rights is all the more difficult in States that repress civil society and limit the ability of labour rights defenders to work. Yet, they still work to defend workers' rights, and the subsequent repression they face highlights the distance that some States have yet to travel in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

53. This was evident, for instance, in Cambodia in 2021, when thousands of workers from the NagaWorld casino went on strike to object to the dismissal of over 1,000 employees, and to call for higher wages and the reinstatement of eight jailed union leaders fired in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁵ Chhim Sitar, the president of an internal trade union created by casino staff, was arrested, along with eight other trade unionists, on charges of "incitement to commit a felony" under articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code. She was sentenced to two years in prison in May 2023.⁶⁶

I. Sustainable Development Goal 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure)

54. Target 2 of Sustainable Development Goal 9 relates to the promotion of inclusive and sustainable industrialization. When industrialization takes place in an ad hoc, unsustainable manner that threatens their human rights, residents are often forced to become human rights defenders to protect the health of their families and communities.

55. Such a situation is occurring in an area of Louisiana (United States) known as "Cancer Alley", which is home to more than 150 refineries and petrochemical plants (see [A/HRC/49/53](#)), reportedly the largest concentration of such plants in the Western Hemisphere.⁶⁷ The presence of these industries has led to increased risks of cancer, respiratory illnesses and other health harms for residents of the area, most of whom are African-American. In 2021, a number of special rapporteurs pointed to the continued development of petrochemical plants in the region as a form of "environmental racism".⁶⁸

56. Grass-roots activists have joined together in "Cancer Alley" to take on the petrochemical and fossil fuel industries and to demand the full realization of their rights. In 2022, Rise St. James and a number of other community organizations sued to prevent the construction of what would have been one of the largest petrochemical plants in the world.⁶⁹ Although the judge invalidated the permits for the plant, the State of Louisiana appealed the decision and won. The community groups and local human rights defenders continue to push for change. In 2024, after years of advocacy, they saw some success when the Government of the United States introduced new

including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.

⁶⁴ Submission from the office of the Human Rights Defender in Armenia.

⁶⁵ See communication AL KHM 1/2023. Available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27812>.

⁶⁶ OHCHR, "Comment by United Nations Human Rights Office spokesperson Jeremy Laurence on Cambodia court upholding charges against Chhim Sithar", 3 May 2024.

⁶⁷ Submission from Human Rights Watch.

⁶⁸ OHCHR, "USA: environmental racism in 'Cancer Alley' must end – experts", 2 March 2021.

⁶⁹ Submission from Human Rights Watch.

regulations⁷⁰ to increase environmental monitoring of chemical plants and to limit their volume of toxic emissions.⁷¹ Local human rights defenders will be key to monitoring whether these regulations are fully implemented.

57. Part of the work that human rights defenders do in contributing to meeting target 3 of Sustainable Development Goal 9, which relates to access to affordable credit, is making microfinance available to rural or marginalized communities that they have supported in their human rights work.

58. In Somalia, a number of human rights organizations, including the Coalition of Somali Human Rights Defenders, the Hirshabelle Women's Empowerment Association and the Horn Afrik News Agency for Human Rights, have partnered to launch a microcredit scheme to provide small loans to individuals and small businesses to allow them to begin or expand their enterprises. The human rights defenders first secured funding from local donors and investors before establishing a transparent process for managing the loan application process and disbursement. They also set up training programmes in financial literacy for recipients while continuing to mentor them throughout the process. This project has contributed to growth in the number of small businesses, increased household income and expanded financial inclusion.⁷² Human rights defenders bring an added value to such projects by possessing a deep understanding of the local contexts, culture and social dynamics. They are trusted by the communities they serve, which facilitates effective communication and collaboration on Sustainable Development Goal initiatives.

J. Sustainable Development Goal 10 (reduced inequalities)

59. The issue of reduced inequalities cuts across every one of the Goals and is central to the philosophy of “leaving no one behind”. It is likewise central to the efforts of human rights defenders to ensure that vulnerable or marginalized communities are provided with the same equality of opportunity as their fellow citizens.

60. In Kenya, defenders of LGBTI+ rights have walked a lonely path to ensure that LGBTI+ people enjoy the same protections against discrimination as every other person in the country. LGBTI+ rights defenders have increasingly used the courts to challenge the constitutionality of bans on their right to associate. In 2015, the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission took a case to the High Court of Kenya after the Non-Governmental Organizations Coordination Board denied them permission to register because the name of their organization was “unacceptable”. The High Court rejected this reasoning, citing article 36 of the Constitution of Kenya guaranteeing freedom of association.⁷³ Following an appeal to the Supreme Court, in 2023 the Court ruled to affirm the right of the Commission to register formally as an NGO.

61. Human rights organizations elsewhere have also been instrumental in developing legal protections for populations at risk of discrimination. In Kyrgyzstan, the Coalition for Equality provided input to a draft law following recommendations the State received from the United Nations Human Rights Committee. Entitled “On

⁷⁰ See www.epa.gov/newsreleases/biden-harris-administration-finalizes-stronger-clean-air-standards-chemical-plants, United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Biden-Harris Administration finalizes stronger clean air standards for chemical plants, lowering cancer risk and advancing environmental justice”, 9 April 2024.

⁷¹ Submission from Human Rights Watch.

⁷² Submission from the Coalition of Somali Human Rights Defenders.

⁷³ See www.klrc.go.ke/index.php/constitution-of-kenya/112-chapter-four-the-bill-of-rights/part-2-rights-and-fundamental-freedoms/202-36-freedom-of-association.

ensuring equality”, the draft law articulated a broad list of protected characteristics, although the final draft presented to Parliament lacked definitions of the different types of discrimination. The Coalition provided further analysis and input to bring it up to international standards but, despite the Coalition’s continuing efforts to press the Government for progress on the law, it remains pending, after unsuccessful attempts to have it passed in 2022 and 2023.⁷⁴ Since then, the work of human rights defenders has become more difficult with the signing into law of a “foreign representatives” bill.⁷⁵

K. Sustainable Development Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities)

62. Access to housing, included in target 1 of Sustainable Development Goal 11, is closely interlinked with the ability of people to feel that they can live in dignity and security,⁷⁶ yet millions of people around the world are denied this right. In many countries, human rights defenders work to enable people to live in dignity and security by helping them face down unjust forced evictions, call for improvement in housing standards and insist on better services.

63. One such group is Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa, a movement of people living in informal settlements and slums which exist as a legacy of the apartheid regime. Against a backdrop of increasing urbanization, a lack of affordable housing and a jobs shortage, these informal settlements have grown considerably since the end of apartheid. Abahlali baseMjondolo organizes projects in the settlements to make them more liveable, including by starting crèches, creating vegetable gardens and running communal poultry farms, as they have done in eKhenana, an informal settlement established after an eviction from Cato Crest in KwaZulu-Natal Province. The group also assists residents in challenging forced evictions in the courts; through its litigation, a number of attempts to move residents without their consent or appropriate redress have been defeated.⁷⁷

64. Community leaders and organizers in Abahlali baseMjondolo have paid a heavy price for their activism. Since August 2022, four members of the group have been murdered, bringing to a total of 24 the number of members who have been killed since 2009. Of the 24 killings, only two have resulted in criminal convictions. Human rights defenders belonging to the movement have also faced threats, harassment and smear campaigns.⁷⁸

65. In recent years in Uzbekistan, forced evictions in the context of urban renewal projects have become widespread, without “adequate consultation, compensation or provision of alternative housing close to the place of habitual residence”.⁷⁹ In response, a loose grouping of human rights defenders established Tashkent-Snos, an organization that focuses on housing rights, with a particular focus on the demolition of traditional neighbourhoods in the country’s cities, forced evictions and unsustainable urbanization. It also monitors the destruction of cultural heritage and the privatization of public squares and parks.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ See https://24.kg/vlast/250755_deputat_parlamentna_predlagaet_vvesti_otvetstvennost_zadiskriminatsiyu.

⁷⁵ OHCHR, “Kyrgyzstan: new law risks undermining work of NGOs”, 5 April 2024.

⁷⁶ See www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-housing/human-right-adequate-housing.

⁷⁷ Submission from Amnesty International South Africa and Abahlali baseMjondolo.

⁷⁸ See communication AL ZAF 4/2023, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28443>.

⁷⁹ See communication AL UZB 1/2024, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28745>.

⁸⁰ Submission from Tashkent-Snos.

66. In one such example of how citizens are organizing to resist forced evictions, Tashkent-Snos highlights how residents of an apartment block listed for demolition banded together to submit appeals to various State institutions, raise visibility through interviews with national and international media, organize cultural gatherings in their homes and in collaboration with others, and research the historical value of the building. The campaign was a success, with the Ministry of Culture of Uzbekistan granting the building protected status.⁸¹ Through publicizing these campaigns and providing education on housing rights and cultural rights, Tashkent-Snos and other human rights organizations are equipping citizens with the knowledge and tools to ensure that their communities remain sustainable and that their cultural and natural heritage remains protected.

L. Sustainable Development Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production)

67. Achieving target 2 of Sustainable Development Goal 12 (sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources) will be possible only in cooperation with peoples and communities whose lives are intertwined with the nature that surrounds them. Human rights defenders have played a prominent role in flagging where the use of natural resources has been neither sustainable nor efficient.

68. In Ecuador, human rights defenders in the community of San Pablo de Amalí, Chillanes Canton, Bolívar Province, have for years resisted the construction and operation of a hydroelectric plant on the Dulcepamba river, warning of negative human rights impacts on the communities living on the riverbank.⁸² Changes in how the river flows were managed by Hidrotambo S.A., the hydroelectric company, which resulted in regular flooding and erosion due in part to the company's diversion of the river route.⁸³ This led to the destruction of homes and farms and the loss of crops. Human rights defenders who peacefully protested the company's actions and highlighted the negative impacts were criminalized, threatened and intimidated.⁸⁴

69. In 2018, community members requested that the National Secretariat for Water assess the use of the river by Hidrotambo⁸⁵ and, the following year, the Government of Ecuador withdrew the company's right to use the river during the summer months. Following consistent advocacy, in May 2023 the Government ordered Hidrotambo to stop using the waters of the Dulcepamba River entirely due to non-compliance issues that had been unearthed in the review requested by San Pablo de Amalí human rights defenders. In parallel, the country's Ombudsman's Office filed a case with the Constitutional Court against Hidrotambo for violating the rights of nature, which had been guaranteed in the country's 2008 Constitution.⁸⁶

70. In pursuing target 6 of Sustainable Development Goal 12,⁸⁷ human rights defenders and organizations were instrumental in pushing for binding legislation on

⁸¹ Radmir Khajbakhteev, "How Uzbekistan's rampant development is prompting a grassroots rebellion", *Housing News*, 28 September 2021.

⁸² Submission from the Office of the Ombudsperson of Ecuador.

⁸³ Office of Information Management and Risk Analysis of Ecuador (see https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6320c936bec4711e6d9e3191/t/643ae2e32918882dc8b85d8d/1681580771744/2023-03-27.+informe_chillanes-SNGR.pdf).

⁸⁴ Submission from the Office of the Ombudsperson of Ecuador.

⁸⁵ See http://esacc.corteconstitucional.gob.ec/storage/api/v1/10_DWL_FL/e2NhcNBlDGE6J2VzY3JpdG8nLCB1dWlkOicyMDg5NjAyNS1iNmNhLTQ4ZjYtOWI1Mi1lZmM0N2M2MjM2NWlucGRmJ30=.

⁸⁶ Submission from the Office of the Ombudsperson of Ecuador.

⁸⁷ Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle.

environmental and human rights due diligence for business at the European Union level for nearly a decade before the European Union Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive was finally adopted in 2024. As part of the process, NGOs brought the voices of human rights defenders from areas negatively affected by business activities to ensure that policymakers and legislators could hear first-hand from those at risk of being left behind. Four civil society organizations (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, Front Line Defenders, Indigenous Peoples Rights International and Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales), with the support of the Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders, held workshops with over 60 human rights defenders from Africa, Asia and Latin America so that their concerns could be included for consideration when the text of the Directive was being finalized.⁸⁸

M. Sustainable Development Goal 13 (climate action)

71. With 83 per cent of States Members of the United Nations formally recognizing the right to a healthy environment in their domestic law,⁸⁹ it is no surprise that human rights defenders are often on the front lines of promoting, protecting and defending this right. Through their action in opposition to violations of the right to a healthy environment, they push Governments to meet target 2 of Sustainable Development Goal 13.⁹⁰ Yet, even in the United Nations spaces created to address climate action, including the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, human rights defenders face challenges to meaningfully participating, including with regard to restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association in host countries.⁹¹ It is through civil society participation that the stories of those affected by climate change and human rights abuses can be heard, despite often significant limitations by host countries.

72. When human rights defenders attempt to assert their right to a clean and healthy environment, they are often met with violence. In her report to the Human Rights Council at its forty-sixth session, in 2021 (A/HRC/46/35), the Special Rapporteur noted that human rights defenders acting in defence of the environment were among those defenders most likely to be killed.

73. Students against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline is a non-violent movement in Uganda which aims to achieve climate justice through outreach, education, peaceful protests and civil disobedience. The movement was created in 2022 to oppose the construction of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline and is present in 12 universities across the country. In September 2023, when a number of students sought to deliver petitions to Ugandan parliamentarians calling on them to end investment in fossil fuel projects and to redirect the funding to renewable sources of energy, a number of the human rights defenders were allegedly assaulted by police, detained and held in custody for two days before being granted bail.

74. In a context in which many people believe that their Governments are failing them in relation to climate change⁹² against a backdrop of missed Paris Agreement goals and a “rapidly narrowing window to raise ambition and implement existing

⁸⁸ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre and others, “Hearing the human: ensuring due diligence legislation effectively amplifies the voices of those affected by irresponsible business” (October 2021).

⁸⁹ OHCHR, “High Commissioner urges climate action to be guided by human rights”, 13 June 2024.

⁹⁰ Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning.

⁹¹ Joint submission from Amnesty International, the Center for International Environmental Law, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, and the Global Climate Legal Defense Network.

⁹² See <https://peoplesclimate.vote>.

commitments” (FCCC/SB/2023/9), it is unsurprising that demonstrations and civil disobedience have become popular tools of the climate movement to pressure Governments into taking more action.

75. Target 3 of Sustainable Development Goal 13 instructs States to “improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning”. Yet, instead of channelling the energy of climate activists, who are raising awareness and educating people about the risks of climate breakdown, an increasing number of States in Europe and elsewhere are instead turning to legislation to restrict the rights of these defenders to continue their work. In a 2024 position paper entitled “State repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience: a major threat to human rights and democracy”, the Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders noted legislative changes in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which have all introduced harsher sentences for certain forms of non-violent protest.⁹³ With such steps, Governments are hampering the ability of human rights defenders to help them achieve Goal 13.

N. Sustainable Development Goal 14 (life below water)

76. As with any of the Sustainable Development Goal targets that call for an end to harmful practices, the protection of the environment, a reduction in polluting activity and increased access for a group whose customs are at risk, such as small-scale artisanal fishers, human rights defenders contribute to the monitoring and enforcement of Goal 14 targets.

77. A group of coastal communities in Papua New Guinea has come together to form the Alliance of Solwara Warriors to campaign against deep-sea mining in the region. The Alliance is concerned about the “potential effects of noise and chemical pollution from deep-sea mining activity on the marine environment and life”.⁹⁴ Responding to reports last year that deep-sea mining was looking increasingly likely to proceed, the governor of coastal Oro Province warned that the “unknowns” of deep-sea mining were too great to ignore and in Parliament said, “Leaders of coastal communities, if you do not stop this and do not watch this with concern, then you are failing your people.”⁹⁵

78. Twenty-seven states have called for a ban, moratorium or precautionary pause on deep-sea mining, including Brazil, Canada, Fiji, France and Germany,⁹⁶ until the risks are better understood. Over the past several years, the Alliance of Solwara Warriors has been engaging in awareness-raising, education outreach and alliance-building to ensure that the populations most likely to be affected by deep-sea mining are fully cognizant of the potential risks that the venture poses. This comes in a context in which information about the project has reportedly been difficult to obtain and local communities have complained about a lack of free, prior and informed consent.⁹⁷

79. The One Ocean Hub research team based at the University of Cape Town in South Africa has been working with small-scale fishers to help deliver target B of

⁹³ Michael Forst, “State repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience: a major threat to human rights and democracy”, position paper, February 2024.

⁹⁴ Submission from the Ocean Defenders Project.

⁹⁵ “Minister explains Solwara 1 project”, *The National*, 17 August 2023.

⁹⁶ See <https://deep-sea-conservation.org/solutions/no-deep-sea-mining/momentum-for-a-moratorium/governments-and-parliamentarians>.

⁹⁷ Submission from the Ocean Defenders Project.

Sustainable Development Goal 14.⁹⁸ It has done so through the creation of georeferenced maps which identify the traditional fishing areas of small-scale fishers, which in turn allows fishers to advocate for the creation of small-scale fishing zones. This information has fed into the work of the South African National Biodiversity Institute as it develops biodiversity maps. These maps will then be used as a basis for the marine spatial planning process in South Africa, including to help guide the Government on responses to mining applications. In March 2023, One Ocean Hub held a workshop for fishers from Northern Cape and Western Cape Provinces, at which all participants requested assistance in developing similar maps in order to assist them in negotiating with the authorities in the marine planning processes.⁹⁹

O. Sustainable Development Goal 15 (life on land)

80. In every region of the world, human rights defenders are active in defending and promoting target 1 of Sustainable Development Goal 15.¹⁰⁰ This often occurs against a backdrop of risk, typically after local communities and human rights defenders have not been meaningfully consulted in advance of or during the development of major disruptive projects in regions where they have lived for generations. In this context, environmental defenders are routinely subjected to arrest, imprisonment, physical attack and killing.

81. Environmental human rights defenders and herder communities in Mongolia have been raising concerns about the impact of the activities of mining companies in the country, including the shrinking of pastureland, the increase in dust and noise pollution and the consequences for human and livestock health.¹⁰¹ The Mongolian civil society organization network on the Sustainable Development Goals has drawn on these concerns in preparing an assessment report on the progress of implementation of the Goals.¹⁰²

82. In Tibet, human rights defenders have highlighted the imposition of mining and infrastructure projects, against the wishes of the local Tibetan population, that pose a risk to the sustainability of land use, ecosystems and biodiversity. In the absence of any meaningful consultation or free, prior and informed consent, Tibetans have protested such actions, which has led to their imprisonment. At least two human rights defenders were jailed for 10 and 11 years in 2014 for their alleged participation in an environmental protest against mining operations at the site of a local sacred mountain, Naglha Dzamba in Biru County.¹⁰³

83. In February 2024, more than 100 Tibetans reportedly gathered peacefully at a local government office in Ganzi Prefecture in Sichuan Province to express their opposition to the Gangtuo hydropower project, which would force the relocation of thousands of Tibetans and six monasteries, one of which dates to the thirteenth century. Residents were also concerned by the environmental damage, destruction of ecosystems and flooding of villages that would likely take place if the hydropower

⁹⁸ Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.

⁹⁹ Submission from One Ocean Hub.

¹⁰⁰ By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements.

¹⁰¹ Prarthana Rao and Valerio Loi, *From Dreams to Dust: Examining the impact of Mining on Herder Communities in Mongolia* (Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, 2023).

¹⁰² Mongolian civil society joint report on a scoring assessment of progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.

¹⁰³ See communication AL CHN 14/2023, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28246>.

project proceeded. In response to the protests, Chinese police detained protesters and, at the time of writing, two were reported to remain in the detention.¹⁰⁴

84. In Mexico, the Rarámuri Choréachi (also known as the Pino Gordo) and Coloradas de la Virgen Indigenous communities in the Sierra Tarahumara in the State of Chihuahua have for decades been fighting back against the scourge of illegal logging in lands they claim as their own by ancestral right.¹⁰⁵ The Sierra Tarahumara is home to two thirds of the “standing timber” in Mexico,¹⁰⁶ although rapid deforestation in recent years has led to significant tree loss.

85. In 2015, following persistent campaigning by the Rarámuri Choréachi and other Indigenous groups, the Unitary Agrarian Tribunal withdrew logging permits for the Coloradas de la Virgen forest that had been granted by the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources in 2007. The ruling further instructed that the Ministry must consult with the Indigenous community in the territory before issuing any further permits. Despite this, activities allegedly linked to the development of forestry projects in areas continue to be carried out and, as a result of their advocacy concerning litigation against and the publicizing of such activities, human rights defenders from the community have been subjected to severe risks, up to and including murder.¹⁰⁷

P. Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions)

86. Sustainable Development Goal 16 is the Goal considered most closely linked to human rights defenders, in part because it is the only Goal with targets or indicators that explicitly mention human rights defenders. With its emphasis on promoting the rule of law, reducing all forms of violence and protecting fundamental freedoms, Goal 16 speaks to the work that often falls into the category of “classic” human rights defender work. This work is indeed human rights defender work, but, as the Special Rapporteur demonstrates in the present report, it is part of a bewilderingly wide range of work that human rights defenders do.

87. Prior to her arrest in Egypt in 2018, human rights lawyer Hoda Abdel Moneim had extensively used the law to promote the rule of law; she had worked to “ensure equal access to justice for all” by legally representing persons who had been jailed for exercising their freedom of belief and freedom of expression. She had further contributed to meeting that target by documenting and drawing attention to instances of enforced disappearance. A former member of the Egyptian Bar Association, the National Council for Human Rights and the Parliament of Egypt (from 2012–2013),¹⁰⁸ Hoda Abdel Moneim was arrested and forcibly disappeared in 2018 and eventually sentenced to five years’ imprisonment in 2023, backdated to the date of her arrest, on the charge of joining an unspecified terrorist organization. On the day she was due to be released in 2023, she was informed of two new charges against her, including one identical to the charge for which she had just completed her prison term.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Submission from the International Campaign for Tibet.

¹⁰⁵ Submission from Red de Defensa del Territorio Indígena en la Sierra Tarahumara (Chihuahua, Mexico).

¹⁰⁶ United Nations Environment Programme, “Protecting the Sierra Tarahumara, a biodiversity hot spot”, 28 June 2019.

¹⁰⁷ See communication AL MEX 2/2024, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28798>.

¹⁰⁸ Submission from the Committee for Justice.

¹⁰⁹ See communication AL EGY 7/2023, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28706>.

88. In Poland, equal access to justice for all¹¹⁰ was put at risk following the judicial reforms introduced by the Law and Justice Party after it came to power in 2015.¹¹¹ These reforms threatened the separation of powers through the interference of the executive and legislative powers in the independence of the judiciary.¹¹² Human rights and legal organizations responded by launching appeals to regional human rights mechanisms and engaging in outreach to the Polish public. The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights made complaints to the European Court of Human Rights, lobbied for preliminary referrals to the Court of Justice of the European Union and submitted cases to the United Nations special procedures.¹¹³ Lawyers in Poland launched the Free Courts Foundation in 2017 to defend and promote the rule of law through public engagement, pro bono legal representation and advocacy. The Foundation has handled over 100 cases relating to judicial independence and rule of law and has made representations before the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the European Union. It has also run seminars for students on the values contained in the European Convention on Human Rights.¹¹⁴

Q. Sustainable Development Goal 17 (partnerships for the Goals)

89. Not one of the Sustainable Development Goals could be achieved without States having the necessary data to assess progress on the meeting of targets. In this regard, human rights defenders make an enormous contribution to collecting data, ranging from the general human rights data frequently collected by national human rights institutions, to more specific data on the incidence of attacks on human rights defenders, as collected by various human rights NGOs at the national, regional and international levels.

90. Where marginalized groups are concerned, robust data collection methodologies are all the more important to ensure that their experiences are accurately reflected in Sustainable Development Goal monitoring and reporting. Twenty-one Indigenous Peoples' groups and a steering committee of five organizations, with the support of the European Union, have collaborated to develop and implement the Indigenous Navigator,¹¹⁵ a set of tools to monitor the implementation of the following: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; core human rights conventions as they pertain to Indigenous Peoples; the Sustainable Development Goals; and the outcomes of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. It is now being used by Indigenous organizations and communities in 29 countries across Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Arctic to allow them to create their own quality data while simultaneously raising awareness of their internationally recognized human rights.¹¹⁶

91. In a 2021 study, the International Land Coalition highlighted the lack of official State data on attacks against human rights defenders, as called for in indicator 10.1 of Sustainable Development Goal 16, in their voluntary national reports on their progress in meeting the Goals. It found that “of the 162 countries that have submitted

¹¹⁰ Target 3 of Sustainable Development Goal 16: promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

¹¹¹ Submission from the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute.

¹¹² See communication AL POL 1/2017, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=23250>.

¹¹³ Submission from the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute.

¹¹⁴ See <https://worldjusticeproject.org/world-justice-challenge/free-courts-foundation-defending-rule-law-poland>.

¹¹⁵ See <https://indigenoustravel.org>.

¹¹⁶ Submissions from the Danish Institute for Human Rights and the Indigenous Peoples Major Group.

voluntary national reports since 2015, only 3 – fewer than 2 per cent – indicated that at least one human rights defender had been killed or attacked”.¹¹⁷

92. In 2018, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions adopted the Marrakech Declaration, committing to promote and protect human rights defenders, including through monitoring and reporting on civic space. As part of this commitment, the Danish Institute for Human Rights, in close cooperation with OHCHR and several other institutions, including human rights defender networks, developed the Right to Defend Rights monitoring tool to capture and record violations of the right to defend rights.¹¹⁸

93. “A” status national human rights institutions are using this framework to widen their outreach to human rights defenders, cooperating with them on the consolidation of data on abuses and violations and strengthening their own analysis and monitoring of the situation for human rights defenders in countries. For example, together with several NGOs and national authorities, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights has used the Right to Defend Rights tool to collect data on the situation of human rights defenders in Kenya and to jointly assess gaps in implementation of that country’s obligations and commitments in this regard. With the consent of groups involved, aggregated data on alleged violations and abuses has been submitted to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics with the aim of contributing to the country’s 2024 voluntary national review to the high-level political forum on sustainable development in New York.¹¹⁹

IV. Recommendations

94. **The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders makes the following recommendations to Member States:**

(a) **Publicly recognize the role that human rights defenders play in helping States achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular in the context of “leaving no one behind”;**

(b) **Adopt, amend or retract laws to ensure that human rights defenders and other members of civil society do not face restrictions in carrying out their legitimate work in furthering the 2030 Agenda;**

(c) **Ensure that comprehensive human rights due diligence is conducted, including by obtaining free, prior and informed consent, before any resource exploitation or infrastructure projects begin that may undermine the Sustainable Development Goals by putting at risk the human rights of people living in the area concerned;**

(d) **Support national human rights institutions that are compliant with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles) in monitoring and reporting on the national situation of human rights, including on how restrictions in civic space affect them, as outlined in the Marrakech Declaration;**

(e) **In collaboration with national human rights institutions and human rights defenders themselves, develop enhanced monitoring and reporting**

¹¹⁷ International Land Coalition and Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders, “A crucial gap 2023: the limits to official data on attacks against defenders and why it’s concerning” (July 2023).

¹¹⁸ Submission from the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

¹¹⁹ See <https://defend.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Final%20Report%20-%20Human%20Rights%20Defenders%20-%20Kenya%20-%20April%202024.pdf>.

mechanisms to collect data on attacks against human rights defenders, trade unionists and journalists, in line with indicator 10.1 of Sustainable Development Goal 16, including by collecting disaggregated data on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, gender, geographical location and other relevant characteristics, and use those data to inform protection policies;

(f) Refrain from criminalizing human rights defenders for their peaceful work in advancing sustainable development, even if their approach differs from that of the State;

(g) Immediately, transparently and rigorously investigate any attacks against human rights defenders and take into consideration their human rights work as a possible motive for such attacks;

(h) Support existing efforts to increase accountability for killings and other attacks on defenders, including through national-level criminal procedures and regional and international accountability mechanisms and commissions of inquiry, and ensure that when a human rights defender is killed, authorities automatically pursue the human rights work of the defender as a line of inquiry into the motivation for the killing;

(i) Create or further develop forums and platforms for all relevant actors, including human rights defenders, to provide input into the process of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and to allow opportunities for them to raise concerns about impediments that they face in their work towards achieving the Goals.

95. The Special Rapporteur makes the following recommendations to businesses and international financial institutions:

(a) Develop and publish human rights defender-specific policies, in consultation with human rights defenders, in order to better protect defenders;

(b) Commit to systematically conducting human rights and environmental due diligence throughout the life cycle of a project, ensuring that free, prior and informed consent from affected communities has been obtained before work begins.

V. Updates since 2021 on the long-term imprisonment of human rights defenders

96. Communications on the issue of the long-term imprisonment of human rights defenders were sent to 24 States in 2020 and 2021. Since her last update on the release of human rights defenders in these communications, the Special Rapporteur is pleased to note that Indian human rights defender G.N Saibaba was acquitted of all charges and released in March 2024, having spent almost 10 years in prison.

97. She further welcomes the release on pardon of Naji Fateel in Bahrain in March 2024 and the pardoning of Mohamed El-Baqer and Patrick George Zaki in Egypt in July 2023, as well as the acquittal of Jamila Loukil in Algeria in December 2023.

98. She regrets the continued imprisonment of human rights defenders serving 10 years or more in 16 countries, as indicated in her 2021 report, namely: Bahrain, Belarus, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Morocco, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates and Viet Nam. This includes

human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia (Mohammed al-Qahtani and Issa Al-Nukhaifi) and the United Arab Emirates (Mohamed al-Roken, Hadif Rashed Abdullah al-Owais and Salim Hamdoon al-Shahhi) who remain in prison and face new charges despite having completed their 10-year sentences in 2022. She is appalled by the dismissal of the supervisory appeal by woman human rights defender Ulfathonim Mamadshoeva in Tajikistan in January 2024 against a 20-year prison sentence handed down to her in December 2022 as a result of her human rights work. She is further dismayed by the sentencing of Buzurgmehr Yorov to an additional 10 years in prison in July 2023 in the same country, adding to the 18-year prison sentence he was already serving. The Special Rapporteur renews her call for the release of all human rights defenders imprisoned because of the exercise of their right to defend rights.
