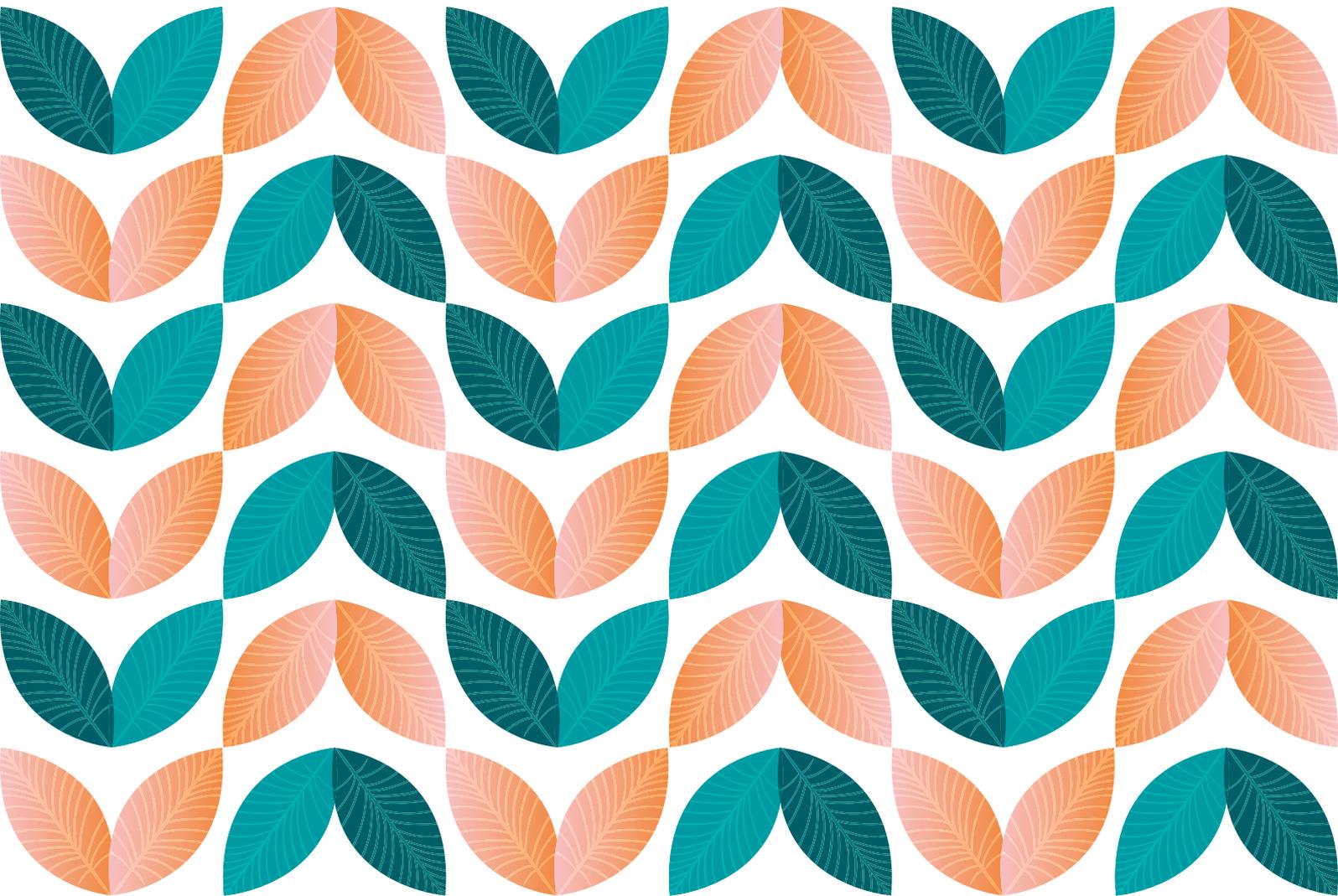




POSITION PAPER

A Critical Approach to the Protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders



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We should never forget that Environmental Human Rights Defenders are at the forefront of the climate and environmental justice struggle. This is one of the main struggles of our time, for which many EHRDs have sacrificed their lives.

The content and findings of this publication were authored by humans without the use of Artificial Intelligence. Following the completion of the draft, Gemini was utilised solely for linguistic refinement and to enhance the structural flow of the text in some of the sections.

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Executive Summary

In this publication, Protection International (PI) lays the groundwork for a better understanding of what a safe and enabling environment for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) should entail, and how to achieve it. Rather than offering definitive answers, this paper contributes to the rich, ongoing dialogue within the organisations and networks supporting EHRDs.

PI advocates for a situated and intersectional approach which places the needs of EHRDs at the center of all efforts, recognising the inseparability of human and environmental rights for many EHRDs, especially Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLC). This approach seeks to tackle the social, economic, and political power structures that fuel aggression against EHRDs. We argue that EHRDs, as they challenge corporate harm and human rights violations, are essential to resolving the triple planetary crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Solutions to this crisis must be just and fair, putting the most affected and vulnerable groups at the centre of any solutions. Therefore, the protection of EHRDs must be viewed through a broader environmental justice lens.

The first section of this paper examines the legal and normative frameworks for EHRD protection. Despite the adoption of numerous international instruments, such as the Escazú Agreement, that acknowledge and call for the protection of EHRDs, their non-binding nature and unsatisfactory implementation often render these legal frameworks inadequate. This challenge is compounded by national laws that can facilitate the criminalisation of defenders.

The second section discusses barriers, or disabling factors, that hinder the work and safety of EHRDs, contributing to a disabling environment for the exercise of the right to defend human rights. This section also explores a range of potential strategies to foster a safe and enabling environment for EHRDs, moving beyond immediate protection measures to address the underlying systemic threats they face.

In the third section of this paper, PI provides evidence that the most effective protection strategies are collective, incorporating protection networks (both internal and external). These strategies should also focus on developing positive narratives to counteract stigmatisation, alongside comprehensive psychosocial support and collective care.

The paper concludes that collaboration among all stakeholders invested in the protection of EHRDs—governments, businesses, civil society, and financial institutions—is more vital than ever, being intrinsically linked to the defence of the planet and our collective future.

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Introduction: an Intersectional Approach to the Protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders

Our planet is facing a triple planetary crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. All around the world, individuals, communities, and social movements are fighting for the preservation of nature, natural resources and the planet. The diversity of actors who defend the environment reflects the diversity of the challenges they are facing as well as the global scale of these challenges. This position paper lays the groundwork for a better understanding of what a safe and enabling environment for Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) should entail, and how to achieve it. Protection International (PI) does not claim to offer definitive answers; rather, this paper contributes to the rich ongoing debate within the organisations and networks supporting EHRDs.

EHRDs are at the forefront of actions aiming at creating a more sustainable, fair, and just world. They challenge corporate human rights violations, abuses and environmental destruction, along with the failure of states to protect their citizens from the impact of climate change and corporate harm.

However, attacks against EHRDs are on the rise. They face threats from state and non-state actors alike, including businesses, especially as the green energy transition increases competition for land use. Global Witness recorded 196 murders of EHRDs in 2023, 146 in 2024, and over 2000 since their record began in 2012. Over the course of a decade, between January 2015 and December 2024, the Business and Human Rights Centre reported that out of 6,400 attacks against people who had voiced concerns about businesses, nearly three quarters targeted climate, land and environmental defenders.

Murders, judicial harassment, such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), disappearances, physical aggressions, physical, verbal and online threats, defamation, and laws against public protest and non-violent action, are all part of the array of strategies used by perpetrators to silence EHRDs. Indigenous peoples and rural communities are the most vulnerable to these attacks.





PI follows the definition of Environmental Human Rights Defenders given by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), Michel Forst, in his 2016 report on EHRDs. EHRDs are “*individuals and groups who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna*”. We argue that this definition best reflects both the diversity of EHRDs and the interconnection between the environment and human rights.

EHRDs comprise a broad spectrum of individuals and groups who may not always identify themselves as such, yet act to protect a diverse array of rights relating to the environment. Their work spans defending access to healthy and sustainable food, clean air, safe water and sanitation, and development, among other essential rights. EHRDs come from varied backgrounds and identities, including Indigenous peoples, rural and peasant communities, urban collectives, and social movements.

This diversity of defenders is mirrored by the different struggles they face, each characterised by unique motivations, claims, strategies, and risks. For instance, confronting mining exploitation in Peru is different from opposing the construction of an oil pipeline in Uganda, or protesting fossil fuel investments in a European city. Recognising and protecting EHRDs requires an understanding of the range of actors and the distinct challenges each faces, making it essential to avoid conflating their struggles or identities.

EHRDs are essential to resolving the triple planetary crisis. They challenge corporate harm and pressure states to fulfill their human rights, climate, and environmental obligations. Their struggle unfolds at the nexus of profound threats to both people and the planet, from **deforestation** and the ruthless **exploitation of resources** by extractive industries to the risks posed by the **energy transition** and the **climate crisis** itself.

Furthermore, EHRDs are crucial for protecting the land rights of affected communities and for implementing effective climate and nature-based solutions. There is growing recognition that resource exploitation, conservation initiatives, and climate solutions must respect the rights of EHRDs, especially those from Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities. Recent **research** confirms that projects respecting these rights and including communities in their design and implementation achieve more successful outcomes at all levels.

Solutions to the triple planetary crisis must not only contribute to reducing pollution, lowering carbon emissions and restoring biodiversity. They must also be just and fair, putting the most affected and vulnerable groups at the centre of any solutions. As such, the protection of EHRDs must be understood within a broader environmental justice framework. This framework must recognise that environmental degradation disproportionately affects Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities, and is often rooted in structural inequalities tied to colonialism and globalised resource exploitation. This means that there is a need to decolonise the discourse and practices on the protection of EHRDs. Protection strategies and initiatives must therefore be based on the voice, needs, and practices of communities to be both successful and legitimate.

PI advocates for a situated and intersectional approach to the protection of EHRDs. The aim of this strategy is to place EHRDs and their needs at the center of all protection efforts, thus creating a safe and enabling environment for them. The approach acknowledges that the conceptual distinction between human and environmental rights often blurs in the reality of individual and collective struggles. For Indigenous and peasant communities, in particular, defending their rights and defending the environment are fundamentally inseparable acts.

This approach acknowledges that effective EHRD protection requires more than just dissuading all attacking groups - including illegal criminal organisations, companies, or states. It also means tackling the social, economic, and political power structures that empower these actors and fuel aggressions against EHRDs. This is all the more challenging given the diminishing respect for international and human rights law - marked by rising authoritarianism - and the reality that legal frameworks designed to address business impacts on human rights and the environment are non-binding, leading to a **systemic failure** in compliance by most businesses.

In such a challenging context, achieving a safe and enabling environment for EHRDs also requires extensive collaboration among groups working on different issues - at the intersection of business and human rights, conservation and climate change, and human rights defense - a need that is especially critical given the decreasing funding for human rights work.

This paper is structured into three main sections. The first examines the legal and normative frameworks for the protection of EHRDs. The second, drawing on PI's years of experience with rural, Indigenous, urban, and activist communities across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, outlines the components of a safe and enabling environment for EHRDs. Finally, the third section offers reflections on key protection strategies.

1. Legal and Normative Frameworks for the Protection of EHRDs

Efforts to achieve environmental sustainability amidst the accelerating climate crisis have intensified over the last few decades. They include conserving natural resources and preserving biodiversity, while also protecting those – individuals and collectives alike – who work towards these goals. A number of instruments have been adopted over the years with environmental sustainability in mind. This section provides a brief (and non-exhaustive) summary of some of the instruments that mention the people and communities who play a role in environmental protection.

It should be noted that prior to the adoption of instruments referring to EHRDs specifically, many focused on Indigenous peoples. This is noteworthy as the link between Indigenous peoples and environmental protection cannot be ignored: along with Afro-descendant peoples and local communities, Indigenous peoples have been described as the “*guardians and stewards of the world's natural landscapes*”. This link is made evident in some of the following instruments.

Some key international developments

International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989)

- requires that Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' rights to the natural resources pertaining to their lands be specifically safeguarded, including the right to participate in the use, management, and conservation of these resources
- obligates governments to undertake effective consultations with these peoples before authorising any programs for the exploration or exploitation of resources on their lands

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992)

- describes the Earth as “*our home*”
- provides that human beings are “*entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature*”
- states that environmental protection and development must be considered together
- recognises the crucial role that Indigenous peoples, their communities and other local communities play in environmental management and development in light of their knowledge and traditional practices

Convention on Biological Diversity (1992)

- recognises the importance of many Indigenous and local communities' traditional knowledge, innovations and practices for the conservation of biological diversity
- calls for this knowledge to be respected, preserved and maintained

Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994)

- acknowledges the importance of ensuring the full participation of women in environmental decision-making to achieve the sustainable management of natural resources

Some key international developments

Aarhus Convention (2001)

- is considered “*the leading international agreement on environmental democracy*”
- protects every person’s right to live in a healthy environment
- grants the public rights pertaining to access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters
- calls on Parties to recognise and support those who defend the environment
- provides for the creation of a rapid response mechanism for the protection of environmental defenders which was established in 2021 in the form of an independent **Special Rapporteur**

General Recommendation No.37 on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change (2018) by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

- highlights that it is critical to promote the participation of girls and young women in all stages – creation, development, implementation, and monitoring – of climate change and disaster risk reduction policies

Resolution 40/11 of the Human Rights Council (2019)

- recognises the contribution of EHRDs to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development
- reinforces the mandate to protect them

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022)

- is to be used as a strategic plan for the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity
- sets out 24 Global Targets for 2030, which includes ensuring the full protection of EHRDs

Declaration +25 (2024)

- is an authoritative, civil society-led document meant to be read in conjunction with the UN Declaration on HRDs, which it supplements
- addresses the UN Declaration’s lack of specific mention of EHRDs
- acknowledges “*the environmental and climate crisis and the vital role of human rights defenders working on a just transition, and in ensuring a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all*”
- calls, in its article 6.1.c, on states to guarantee the safety and protection of all HRDs, particularly those at risk or those victims of violations due to “*the issues on and contexts in which they work, including [...] climate justice, land and environmental rights*”

Some key developments in Latin America

Montevideo Strategy (2016)

- provides a gender responsive roadmap for implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean
- states that “[r]ural, indigenous and campesino women are guardians of biodiversity”

Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (2018)

- is better known as the Escazú Agreement
- is the first international treaty to include provisions on the rights of environmental defenders
- calls on Parties to “*guarantee a safe and enabling environment for persons, groups and organisations that promote and defend human rights in environmental matters, so that they are able to act free from threat, restriction and insecurity*”
- states that Parties must take measures to “*recognise, protect and promote all the rights of human rights defenders in environmental matters*” and to “*prevent, investigate and punish attacks, threats or intimidations*” that they might face while carrying out activities in defense of the environment

Manaus Declaration on Human Rights in the Climate Emergency (2024)

- is a crucial document for EHRDs, which was presented to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) in 2024
- highlights the obligation of states to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for defenders to continue their work without facing threats, violence, or reprisals
- establishes that states must adopt specific measures to protect defenders
- emphasises the need to recognise and promote their rights

Advisory Opinion on the climate emergency and human rights (2025) of the IACtHR

- underscores the vital role that EHRDs play in addressing the climate emergency
- explicitly acknowledges the unique challenges and disproportionate risks that certain EHRDs face due to their intersecting identities (such as those of Indigenous people, youth, women and LGBTQI+ activists)
- urges states to actively support and promote human rights defence work and to refrain from obstructing it

Some key developments in the European Union (EU)

Guidelines on HRDs (2004)

- are meant to assist EU Missions in their approach to protecting HRDs in third countries
- address specific concerns regarding HRDs but do not mention EHRDs specifically
- should be updated, according to the European Parliament, to better reflect the specific risks that environmental and indigenous rights defenders face, following a 2023 **report on** these Guidelines by the European Parliament which stressed that *"the EU should address climate protection as an integral human rights issue under its HRD policy and step up its action in support of those defending the climate and the environment, especially those environmental and indigenous peoples' rights defenders who are most at risk"*

European Parliament resolution of 19 May 2021 on the effects of climate change on human rights and the role of environmental defenders on this matter

- stresses that the global decline of civil society space disproportionately impacts environmental and land rights defenders
- calls for the adoption of *"national action plans that guarantee a safe and free environment for environmental defenders by integrating a wider perspective of collective protection"*
- highlights the need to specifically address the unique protection needs of women HRDs

Some key developments in Asia

Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment (2025) adopted by the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

- acknowledges *"the need for sufficient and effective protection for [...] persons working to promote and protect the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment"*
- does not specify what measures should be taken to protect them, nor explicitly calls on ASEAN member states to uphold the right to defend human rights in environmental matters

While the adoption of all these instruments is commendable and shows states' willingness to enshrine the protection of EHRDs in legal texts, more still needs to be done for these instruments to have a concrete impact on the ground. The lack of binding effect of some of these instruments, the reluctance of some states to ratify them, or their unsatisfactory implementation exemplify that having a legal framework is not enough to effectively protect EHRDs.

The fact that some measures taken by states directly contradict their international commitments to the protection of EHRDs is also noteworthy. In many countries, the national legal framework carries more weight in practice than international obligations, with all the shortcomings this may entail when it comes to protecting EHRDs. For instance, national provisions may indirectly allow for the criminalisation of EHRDs. These difficulties can be compounded by the inability or unwillingness of some states' judiciary institutions to uphold international obligations pertaining to the protection of EHRDs, thus leading to violations occurring in impunity.

2. Protecting EHRDs: a Safe and Enabling Environment for EHRDs

In its position paper titled “*Towards a safe and enabling environment for the right to defend human rights*” published in 2024, PI aimed to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the barriers to exercise the right to defend human rights. This section of the paper will briefly go over some of the main points of PI’s aforementioned paper before focusing on some of the specific barriers that EHRDs face and their impact on EHRDs’ work and safety.

2.1. Characteristics of a disabling environment for EHRDs and impact of such an environment on EHRDs

Barriers that hinder the work and safety of HRDs are called *disabling factors*, as they contribute to the creation of a disabling, hostile or unfavourable environment for the exercise of the right to defend human rights. There are “direct barriers”, set with the clear aim of obstructing HRDs’ work, as well as “indirect barriers”, which are linked to the broader context and facilitate the operationalisation of the direct barriers despite not being aimed specifically at hindering human rights defence.

These factors are context-specific and usually linked to actors who have an interest in hampering the work of HRDs. For instance, in the case of EHRDs, physical attacks against them by private actors linked to development projects (direct barrier) can be enabled by contextual dynamics, such as a general climate of impunity and weak judiciary institutions (indirect barriers).

Some disabling factors impact all categories of HRDs. They include criminalisation and legal harassment, restrictive legal frameworks, as well as physical attacks, surveillance and monitoring, but also intimidation, threats and harassment, to name a few. Other disabling factors are more specific to EHRDs due to their activism. The next paragraphs represent an attempt to map current disabling factors that can hinder the safe exercise of EHRDs’ right to defend human rights.

Lack of land titles and non-recognition of historical claims to traditional territories

EHRDs are frequently rooted in specific territories. In such cases, their work is inherently linked to the protection of said territories’ land, natural resources and ecosystems, often in opposition to powerful state or corporate interests. The removal of EHRDs from the lands they have ties to – through forced displacement for instance, as a result of land grabs, destructive exploitation or environmentally-unconscious development projects, to name a few – can have devastating consequences for their ability to carry out their environmental defense work.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** The dire consequences of forced displacement go beyond the loss of physical ties to a territory. They also include the dismantling of social and cultural foundations essential to their livelihoods and environmental stewardship, and the relocation to unfamiliar areas where EHRDs may lack social recognition and support networks. All this can result in weakened legitimacy, difficulties in gathering evidence, obstacles to mobilising, and heightened security threats.

◆ Presence of organised crime

In many regions, the areas that criminal networks plunder through illegal activities (such as mining, wildlife trafficking, logging,...) overlap with the territories that EHRDs aim to protect.



An interview with a woman EHRD from Ecuador also revealed a clear link between organised crime, the defense of the environment, and youth empowerment. Young people can be important actors in climate change mitigation actions, and criminal networks are aware of it. According to the EHRD, in regions where they operate, organised crime actors do not want young people to be educated or critical; they want young people to be ignorant, enslaved, unaware of what is happening, and thus easier to manipulate and corrupt. The EHRD highlighted how this leads to criminal networks targeting EHRDs not only for the actions they take to protect the environment, but also for the awareness-raising activities they carry out.¹

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** The presence of criminal networks can result in perilous situations for EHRDs who are active in areas where such networks operate. The fact that organised crime functions outside the remit of the law and that EHRDs' activism may conflict with the criminal groups' economic interests creates compounded risks for EHRDs. Intimidation, attacks and even assassinations are just some of the risks that EHRDs may face when standing in the way of these networks' operations.

◆ Vulnerability to environmentally-induced health risks and disabilities

Environmental degradation can contribute to the onset of disabilities and health issues. Exposure to polluted air, contaminated water or hazardous waste can lead to long-term impairments for EHRDs, especially when they live in the communities and areas they aim to protect. This convergence of environmental harm and threats to people's physical integrity places EHRDs in a uniquely vulnerable situation, where they face both man-made threats due to their activism, and health risks due to the degradation of the environment they operate or live in.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** Such health impacts can not only reduce EHRDs' physical ability to organise, mobilise and engage effectively, but also fragilise the health of entire communities, and heighten their vulnerability in environments that might already be highly hostile, volatile or dangerous.

◆ Pervasive surveillance

EHRDs, be they rural communities, urban activists, social movements, or non-governmental organisations, face increased surveillance, both physical and digital, by authorities and private security companies alike. New technologies, such as AI-powered tools and drones, are increasingly used by states for the surveillance of environmental activists, especially during protests.

¹ Taken from an interview conducted by PI with an Ecuadorian woman HRD in April 2025. Her testimony was anonymised for safety reasons.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** Surveillance creates a profound chilling effect on EHRDs. This pervasive monitoring forces defenders into self-censorship, making it difficult to organise, investigate and communicate safely, thereby hindering their critical work. The constant threat of being watched or having their communications intercepted also generates psychological pressure, which can lead to EHRDs withdrawing from their activism. Furthermore, surveillance exposes the identities of crucial support networks and allies, putting these individuals and communities at risk of intimidation and violence, effectively isolating EHRDs and crippling their capacity to operate.

◆ Diversity of perpetrators and interplay

Because of the nature of their activism and the interests that this activism may upset, EHRDs face threats from a number of different actors, both public and private. They include private security agents hired by companies, state security forces, illegal loggers or miners, paramilitary groups or organised crime (especially in weak governance zones) but also private citizens who may feel that EHRDs are anti-development, to name a few.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** This diversity of perpetrators creates a complex and unpredictable threat landscape. This situation can increase EHRDs' exposure to danger, potentially resulting in the divestment of resources away from their activism to address their protection needs instead. Further, this wide variety of perpetrators can foster a climate of fear which may discourage EHRDs from carrying out their activism.

◆ Geographical remoteness

EHRDs often operate in isolated or rural areas where ecosystems, habitats and natural resources are directly threatened. In addition to being far from national human rights institutions and foreign embassies, these areas are frequently underserved by infrastructure and legal protections. These factors led the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs to note that a remote location can be a **risk multiplier** for defenders.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** This isolation can embolden perpetrators who know that the lack of visibility of EHRDs combined with minimal state oversight in some areas mean they can act with greater impunity. This risk is compounded by protection challenges of a more logistical nature, such as communication and transportation barriers, the non-existence of nearby legal support, and lack of access to emergency funding, just to name a few. The protection needs of EHRDs who operate in isolated or remote areas are therefore highly specific. Yet, national protection mechanisms – when they do exist – frequently do not adequately meet these particular protection needs.

❖ **Deregulation, and prioritisation of economic and business interests over human rights and environmental concerns**

In many countries, economic and business interests are prioritised and protected above all else. Short-sighted governments often collude with corporate actors, either turning a blind eye to the ecological havoc they wreak or actively promoting their industries, with no regard for sustainability or conservation. Many governments take part in a **deregulation race** to the bottom, by aggressively reducing regulations, offering the lowest taxes, and systematically removing obligations and softening penalties. Such contexts present particularly challenging and hostile conditions for EHRDs to carry out their work.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** States that prioritise business interests may often weaken environmental laws, fail to implement protections and turn a blind eye to corporate abuses, all of which contribute to a disabling environment for defenders. In such settings, EHRDs can also be seen as “enemies” of progress or economic growth rather than as protectors of the environment. These damaging narratives pave the way for stigmatisation, criminalisation and violence against them from private and public actors alike.

Further, state collusion with powerful corporate actors can result in mechanisms designed to uphold rights and protect the environment – such as human rights impact assessment, free prior and informed consent (FPIC) processes, corporate due diligence – being weakened, manipulated or simply bypassed to fast-track development. Such collusion silences EHRDs and excludes them from decision-making processes, depriving them of meaningful avenues to challenge harmful projects and protect their communities.

❖ **Marginalisation of (some) EHRDs**

As custodians of the ecosystems they live in, Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) are key actors in the fight against environmental degradation. Yet, barriers to their meaningful participation in decision-making processes on issues that impact their lands, resources and livelihoods still prevail, resulting in their marginalisation. These obstacles include language and cultural barriers, structural inequalities, the co-optation of climate discourse in international fora by more visible and powerful external actors, as well as limited access to information. Furthermore, the failure to uphold international standards, such as the right to FPIC as derived from ILO Convention No. 169, fundamentally undermines their autonomy and decision-making power over their territories.

- **How does this hinder EHRDs?** The side-lining, even the exclusion, of some EHRDs from key decision-making processes can have many dire consequences on their security. One of these is that EHRDs are prevented from shaping the laws, policies and frameworks intended to protect them, leaving them exposed to threats without appropriate protection measures. Furthermore, the exclusion of EHRDs can lead to their delegitimisation which in turn can result in increased stigmatisation, criminalisation and even violence against them by emboldened perpetrators who may view them as isolated and vulnerable.

2.2. Possible approaches to building a safe and enabling environment for EHRDs

This section explores a range of possible approaches that could contribute to the creation of a safe and enabling environment for EHRDs, looking beyond protection measures to address some of the underlying systemic threats they face. It is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to stimulate deeper reflection on both established and emerging ideas.

✿ Addressing the non-binding character of legal instruments that aim to protect EHRDs

It is crucial to increase the influence of such instruments and to build states' political will to move towards binding commitments for the protection of EHRDs. Several approaches can be considered, such as encouraging states to integrate non-binding international provisions into their domestic legal framework, resorting to political pressure and reputational incentives to promote compliance, as well as using non-binding instruments to build consensus and clarify standards, thus paving the way for binding agreements.

✿ Strengthening voluntary standards on business and human rights

A variety of actors come into play here. While multilateral institutions could be encouraged to explicitly integrate provisions on EHRD protection into their existing standards, states should be incentivised to reflect voluntary standards pertaining to EHRDs in their legal frameworks and policies (such as their national action plans on business and human rights).² This includes promoting uptake and compliance with key frameworks, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's **Guidelines** for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct. In addition, businesses should be encouraged to report on how they assess and mitigate risks for EHRDs throughout their operations. As for development banks and investors, they should condition access to capital on respect for EHRD protection measures *inter alia*.

✿ Ensuring that IPLCs are at the center of decisions over their future

It is essential to address the barriers that IPLCs too often face to their meaningful participation in decision-making processes on issues that affect their lands, resources and livelihoods. In line with ILO Convention No. 169, IPLCs must be guaranteed the fundamental right to set their own development priorities, and be actively included in the entire lifecycle of all development plans that may affect them. Moreover, obtaining IPLCs' FPIC for all projects that may affect them should be non-negotiable – this affirms their rights and agency, recognises them as legitimate and autonomous rights-holders, and supports proactive activism based on self-determination. It is furthermore crucial to ensure they have the capacities to know and claim their rights, and to make informed decisions about their current or future situation. Rights education, capacity-strengthening workshops, and support for the creation or strengthening of community

² The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights encourages all States to develop, enact and regularly update a national action plan on business and human rights. More information: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-business/national-action-plans-business-and-human-rights>

institutions are just some of the approaches that could be considered to ensure IPLCs' ability to meaningfully engage in processes that affect them.

Mapping IPLCs' land and recognising their customary land rights

Mapping IPLCs' land is a **critical step** to creating an enabling environment for their activism. It allows them to represent themselves spatially, but also provides them with legal recognition and political legitimacy to defend their territory and assert their rights. With clearly documented claims to their land, IPLCs are better equipped to advocate for its preservation, push back against encroachment and prevent degradation – often with greater safety and authority.

In the same vein, the recognition of customary land rights – which entails the formal acknowledgment of the territories and resources that IPLCs have traditionally used – further contributes to the creation of an enabling environment for these communities. By transforming previously unrecognised rights into defensible claims, this recognition gives IPLCs a stronger legal and moral basis to mobilise and engage with external stakeholders.

Putting EHRDs at the center of key international fora

EHRDs are uniquely positioned to speak to their own experiences, challenges and needs. Amplifying their voices by ensuring their meaningful participation in international spaces means they can shape the policies and agenda that directly affect them, thus resulting in decisions and outcomes that are more informed, culturally-appropriate and responsive to their realities. The presence of EHRDs in such spaces further allows them to meet allies, build their networks, gain visibility and political support, and access influential decision-makers, all of which contribute to a safer and more supportive environment for their activism.

Carrying out judicial reforms and strengthening the capacities of courts

Courts can either be powerful allies or dangerous adversaries to EHRDs. In too many countries where EHRDs are seen as standing in the way of development, courts fail to act as a check to government power, creating an unsafe climate for anyone who dissents. Ensuring that courts are independent, well-resourced, knowledgeable in environmental law and guided by rule-of-law principles enables them to be a vital avenue for justice, protection and respect for environmental and human rights law. This is essential to ensure that courts act as protectors rather than persecutors of EHRDs. Judicial reforms and the capacity-strengthening of judicial actors are therefore crucial for fostering an environment that supports and empowers EHRDs.

✿ **Fostering collaboration between human rights organisations and environmental organisations**

Collaboration helps break down silos and shows that human rights and environmental protection are interconnected. By combining their respective areas of expertise and showing a united front, human rights and environmental organisations can improve the reach, visibility and influence of their work, resulting in increased political pressure and policy traction. This collaboration can lead to stronger, more resilient movements that are better equipped to resist repression, amplify defenders' voices, and ensure that both human rights and environmental protection are addressed as interconnected struggles.

✿ **Recognising rights of nature**

A growing movement is advocating for the legal recognition of **rights of nature**. Following the 1982 **UN World Charter for Nature** and the **Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth**, several countries - including **Ecuador, Bolivia, and Uganda** - have enshrined nature's rights in their constitutions or laws. Others, like New Zealand (Aotearoa), have given juristic personhood to nature. While there are many questions and challenges linked to the legal recognition of nature's rights, a global recognition of the rights of nature would represent a significant paradigm shift in balancing human development and needs with the respect of the environment. Embracing this concept would not only contribute to a more sustainable and just future for nature itself, but also create an enabling environment that bolsters the work and protection of EHRDs.

As most countries lack supportive environments for the protection of EHRDs, these individuals and collectives, with the help of civil society actors and organisations, have devised their own protection strategies. The subsequent section will explore the key aspects of these strategies, drawing on PI's extensive experience working with EHRDs.

3. Key Strategies for the Protection of EHRDs

For over ten years, PI has collaborated with land and environmental defense communities and collectives in Central America, Colombia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, and Thailand. This extensive partnership has directly shaped PI's innovative protection strategies. PI has observed that the most effective approaches consistently incorporate several key elements: collective protection, robust protection networks, the development of positive narratives, and psychosocial support. This section will outline and provide some evidence about how these integrated approaches contribute to the protection of EHRDs.

3.1. Collective protection and the protection of EHRDs

In *"A Critical Approach to Collective Protection"*, PI highlighted why a collective protection approach is key to the right to defend human rights. Over the past decade, PI first developed this approach through its work alongside rural and indigenous communities who defend their land and territory in Guatemala and Colombia, before expanding its geographic scope to Africa and Asia. Based on this longstanding experience, PI understands collective protection as

” *a set of actions and social practices (organisational, cultural, communal, economic and individual) aimed at increasing collective HRDs' capacity to act, and transforming the balance of power against the backdrop of threats, denial of rights, multiple violence and different systems of oppression (e.g. gender, race, class)".*

A more result-oriented definition puts the emphasis *"on the actions (and the results of those actions) intended to make others respect a collective's use of a territory because of property rights or other rights over the territory; dwelling and livelihoods needs; and environmental, cultural and religious reasons, among others"*. Both these definitions outline the two dimensions that are key to a collective protection approach: the spatial-territorial and interaction-networks dimensions.



United Communities of Puerto Cortes (Tramade), Honduras

Several communities in the Puerto Cortes region have formed a bloc to defend their common resources, as they are being negatively impacted by Agregados del Caribe S.A. de C.V. (AGRECASA), a company operating in the municipality of Puerto Cortes since 2004.

The communities have experienced a progressive deterioration of their environment and living conditions. Mining activity has had serious and persistent impacts, such as contamination of essential water sources, effects on community health with an increase in respiratory and dermatological diseases, damage to housing infrastructure due to constant detonations, and loss of biodiversity. All of this marks a systematic pattern of violation of the right to water, health, a healthy environment, and territory.

PI Mesoamérica has achieved some successes through its support of these communities:

- It has assisted in the strengthening of the coordination space among the communities, as they previously did not have a space for discussions, given they come from different areas;
- It has contributed to the consideration of risk factors in the collective's actions;
- It has shared information on communication for protection, advocacy, and internal security strategies that the communities did not have before;
- It has provided support for secure communications, information storage, and safe transportation of defenders;
- It has strengthened the collective's support network with organisations working on environmental issues.

Based on this support, PI Mesoamérica has drawn some lessons:

- It is important to establish connections between the organisations working with the collective, from a legal, communication, and community perspective;
- A strengthened organisational space is essential to be able to propose an effective protection plan; only from such a space can protection measures be sustained;
- Emotional impact is a risk factor, and addressing these impacts is essential to be able to implement protection practices and raise awareness of self-care in defense work.

PI's collective protection approach for EHRDs extends beyond safeguarding individuals to encompass the protection of land, territory, and the social bonds within a collective. Many EHRDs inherently link environmental defense with the defense of their rights. Therefore, collective protection is inherently territorial, social, relational, and often political. Its purpose is to empower collectives, reimagining security and protection to enable them to collectively envision, resist, transform, and provide mutual care. This involves strengthening internal processes such as leadership, participation, and decision-making within the collective.

Q'eqchi' Maya territory of El Estor, Izabal and Panzós, Guatemala

In the Q'eqchi' Maya territory of El Estor, Izabal and Panzós, PI Mesoamérica seeks to strengthen collective action. It does so by promoting integration and joint actions in response to common land and environmental problems, such as dispossession, tenant farming and the imposition of megaprojects since the mid-20th century.

PI Mesoamérica works to strengthen collective action by communities in several ways:

- Supporting petitions to the IACtHR;
- Acting as a mediating voice and promoting dialogue, especially in times of internal differences and conflicts between various groups;
- By supporting EHRDs' activities;
- By supporting the actions of the external network of organisations that accompany community-based organisations;
- By managing and facilitating the execution of emergency funds with transparency.

“Without placing the power of women defenders at the centre, no environmental protection framework can ever be whole”.

PI's collective protection framework additionally emphasises the crucial role of women defenders,³ who are central to struggles to preserve land, water, rivers, forests, and seas - the fundamental lifelines

of our planet. Authentic protection must be gender-just, community-rooted, and founded upon feminist principles of collective care, solidarity, and self-determination. Ensuring the safety of women EHRDs is not merely about shielding them from harm; it is about amplifying their leadership, honoring their wisdom, and guaranteeing that their visions for just and sustainable futures can take root and flourish.

³ UN Resolution 40/11 recognises *“the importance of gender equality, the empowerment of women and the role women play as managers of natural resources and agents of change in the safeguarding of the environment, as well as the multiple and intersecting forms of violence and discrimination against women human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, children, persons belonging to minorities and rural and marginalised communities”*.



Khon Rak Ban Kerd, Dan Khun Thot - Thailand

In Nakhon Ratchasima, PI supports the efforts of the Khon Rak Ban Kerd community, who has resisted the potash mining project in Dan Khun Thot district for over a decade. Faced with environmental destruction, judicial harassment, and corporate greenwashing, women EHRDs have emerged as central leaders in the struggle. Their collective protection practices combine traditional rituals, communal decision-making, and coordinated advocacy with allies across Thailand. When companies filed SLAPP lawsuits to silence them, the community collectively mobilised legal defense, media outreach, and solidarity campaigns — ensuring that no one stood alone.

Women's voices, often those of mothers and grandmothers, became the moral compass of the movement, framing land not as a commodity but as life itself. As both defenders and caregivers, women and their communities have shared the responsibility of raising the children of women EHRDs during protests and mine-closure campaigns, ensuring that the struggle for justice did not come at the expense of care.

3.2. Protection networks for the protection of EHRDs

In the face of escalating attacks and aggressions against EHRDs—often stemming from powerful business interests, government crackdowns, and pervasive structural violence—it is vital to sustain and strengthen collective action as a fundamental expression of power. As previously noted, networks constitute one of the two core dimensions of collective protection, and PI emphasises the critical importance of cultivating and reinforcing both internal and external networks. Robust networks offer a collective, significantly more sustainable path for the defense of rights and the generation of increased protection opportunities.

Social relationships and networks are essential to human nature and particularly relevant in the context of human rights defence. These relationships create cohesion, well-being, and shared power. By allowing members of networks to act together for mutual benefit, networks are key tools for empowering individuals and collectives to respond to injustices and defend rights.

Collaboration within networks boosts the strength of protection responses through:

- **Solidarity:** Commitment to support other network members.
- **Information:** Easy access to and sharing of knowledge for better decision-making.
- **Shared goals and influence:** Clarity on network goals and member contributions.

While creating and maintaining a network takes time, the benefits are huge. Networks create trust, clear information channels, and agreed-upon social norms that make cooperation possible for tackling shared problems.

PI's years of fieldwork alongside EHRDs have clearly shown that strong relationships are vital for defenders. They increase people's sense of safety and, just as important, they break the isolation that makes rights violations invisible and fosters impunity.



Maya Q'eqchi' territory in the northern lowlands of Guatemala

PI Mesoamérica's support for this region, which comprises some twenty communities in five municipalities and three departments, comes at a time when community leadership and its main partners are beginning to run out of steam.

This is due to the constant lack of response or negative response from justice sector institutions or administrative entities linked to environmental protection. This period also coincides with the arrests of community leaders criminalised by the oil agro-industry and the criminalisation of a community by hoteliers, in open dispute over territory, as well as conflicts between communities and palm oil companies over the privatisation of rural roads or the denial of right of way on historic roads.

PI Mesoamérica has facilitated the incorporation of security considerations for all actions in defense of land and environmental rights. It has also promoted closer ties with duty-holders, to the point that community representatives have been able to directly lobby, advocate, denounce, and share their experiences in Guatemala and abroad. PI Mesoamérica also contributes to maintaining the unity of communities against the harassment, surveillance, provocation, discrediting, and criminalisation they face due to their environmental work.

Based on this, PI operates on one main idea: a group's ability to protect itself increases if it is strong in two ways:⁴

- a)** it is sufficiently well-structured internally, i.e. the relationships between its members are dense enough (they meet frequently, they maintain information-sharing dynamics, there is trust between members, they diversify their leadership, there is broad participation, including women and youth, etc...);
- b)** it has the capacity to build bridges with many external actors (local, national and international). This creates a dense web of relationships with other civil society organisations (CSOs), intergovernmental bodies, academia, religious institutions, and even with governmental and state institutions with responsibility for protection issues.

⁴ Protection International. Research project: Protection networks for HRDs. Internal working document, PRTU team, Mesoamérica and Colombia. 2012

When these internal and external relationships are maintained over time, defenders can⁵:

- Get help fast during emergencies;
- Access and share information to make smart, preventive choices;
- Break isolation and share their struggles with the world;
- Receive political and financial support;
- Raise alerts nationally and internationally;
- Get expert advice (legal, psychosocial, etc.);
- Push institutions to use protection mechanisms.

It is clear that protection networks that combine robust internal communication and broad external alliances can enable EHRDs to gain influence over their territory, all while breaking the isolation that often renders their land and environmental defense struggles invisible and vulnerable to attacks. This approach - collective, sustainable, and led by people on the ground - is the most effective way to keep EHRDs safe and enable them to continue their crucial work.

The Network of People Who Own Mineral Resources in Thailand

In Thailand, PI supports the efforts of the Network of People Who Own Mineral Resources, a nationwide network that links over 30 communities across Thailand resisting potash, coal, and limestone mining. By weaving together local struggles into a broader platform, the Network has broken the isolation of rural defenders, transforming scattered resistance into a visible force. The network coordinates rapid response when members face SLAPP lawsuits, mobilising legal aid, solidarity visits, and national media attention to expose injustice. Through joint trainings, collective analysis, and coordinated advocacy with allies, the Network has enabled communities to speak with a unified voice in front of government bodies and international mechanisms. This dense web of relationships sustains protection not only through legal defense, but also through solidarity rooted in land, life, and dignity, showing how collective power can counterbalance state-corporate repression.

⁵ Protection International. Human rights defenders and networks for their protection: A response to repressive environments. Brussels, 2019

3.3. Positive narratives and community-led communication for the protection of EHRDs

The stigmatisation of HRDs, including EHRDs, in Colombia has been one of the main risk factors for those who lead social, community and territorial processes. Faced with this reality, both community organisations and communities have developed resilient and transformative responses that seek to counter stigmatising discourses, redefine the role of social leadership and build safer and more dignified environments.

Some of the most significant initiatives in this fight against stigmatisation have been the creation of community-led communication plans for protection, and new narratives from the communities and EHRDs themselves.

In *"Taking Care of Us"*, PI explains how community communication is a means to address threats. Communication actions are not only key for strengthening external networks. They also allow communities to broadcast their own vision for the development of their land and territory, promote their culture, history, and language. Communication actions aim to:

- Break the isolation that communities experience due to the dominant and negative narratives imposed by aggressors and opposing actors;
- Dissuade aggressors and opposing actors from acting against the community, hence contributing to maintaining or increasing its socio-political workspace;
- Persuade other groups and actors within society as well as rights bearers to respect the right to defend human rights and take action for the protection of EHRDs.

The isolation of communities and their territories, coupled with targeted misinformation, can lead to severe psychosocial impacts, perpetuate violence, revictimise survivors, deny the right to truth and increase the vulnerability of EHRDs. The communication actions undertaken by communities break the isolation, but also inform and encourage external actors interested in the defence of human rights and territory, as well as those with duties and obligations, to act.

For PI, communication is instrumental to the connection and cohesion of protection networks. The development of a community communication plan for protection involves strengthening networks, reporting human rights violations and seeking to raise awareness among the population in order to legitimise the defence of rights. It is crucial to keep the external network (state, non-state, national and international actors) informed so that it can take action to protect communities. In turn, the internal community network advocates for adherence to human rights issues within the territory, and directs its communication towards the territory, its community and its members. It aims to highlight the importance of the community's human rights defence work and the reasons for it.



Collective work with community radio stations in Guatemala

In Guatemala, community radio stations provide access to information in communities that, due to physical and economic isolation, are denied this right. Following the Peace Accords, radio frequencies were allocated to community radio stations, as they are excluded from telecommunications law.

PI Mesoamérica's focused collective protection efforts with radio stations spanned three distinct regions. This collaboration facilitated the development of shared security suggestions, specifically addressing the protection of their studios and journalistic coverage. Crucially, this initiative also led to the necessary update of a collective security protocol, making it more responsive to the rising criminalisation faced by Indigenous peoples' representatives.

The experience with community communicators has made a significant contribution to the approach to protection work and to the exercise of freedom of expression and access to information for communities.

In Colombia, PI's **work on narratives** – done in **collaboration** with the online media platform **Verdad Abierta** – focuses on indigenous, rural and Afro-Colombian communities defending their lands and territories. These communities, along with groups of communicators, have turned to narrative thinking as a tool for transformation. Many organisations have chosen **to tell their stories** from everyday life, highlighting their struggles, achievements and forms of resistance from a human and collective perspective. These narratives have the potential to change social imaginaries, combat stereotypes and generate recognition and empathy towards defenders.

A key community strategy involves prominently showcasing the **'we are' of daily life**. HRDs in various regions have used community media, social networks, and audiovisual content to share positive experiences. By focusing on everyday interactions, this communication aims to strengthen the bond between leaders and their communities. Content creation often engages diverse community groups. For example, in the experiences of the indigenous guards in Vichada, children, youth, mothers, and fathers have all played an active role in transmitting ancestral practices.

Building territorial memory is a vital practice that helps reinterpret local history, value community contributions, and reinforce collective identity. Through tools like testimonies, timelines, and memory exercises, this practice motivates new generations to engage in organisational efforts and supports the reconstruction of the social fabric by fostering resilience. A clear example is the Cauca Network for Life and Human Rights, which demonstrates how local communication - specifically using rural correspondents and podcast production - can revitalise community cohesion and transformative processes.

In addition, **citizen empathy** is identified as a central element in fighting stigmatisation. To counter discrediting narratives and revictimisation, messages emphasising the dignity, courage, and commitment of defenders have been promoted. Words thus become tools

for self-protection and resistance. Organisations have used these messages to strengthen community unity, provide guidelines for confronting violence, and affirm collective identity against threats.

However, the challenge is not only narratives. It is also a struggle to **construct the truth**. EHRDs frequently challenge the misrepresentation of their communities' experiences. A core aspect of their work is therefore to validate and circulate their own narratives, actively dismantling official or media versions that distort the truth. Furthermore, coordinating with leaders from other regions is vital for exchanging experiences and bolstering networks of protection and mutual legitimisation.

In this context, communication becomes a strategic tool not only for informing, but also for building community, reconstructing identity, demanding rights and protecting life.



Local communication initiatives in Colombia

PI Colombia has **widely documented** its work alongside EHRDs. Local communication initiatives play a key role in coordinating these community actions. Examples include projects in the **Putumayo** and **Cauca** departments, as well as the **Montes de María** and **Catatumbo** regions, which utilise community radio stations, communication schools, and digital platforms. These communication channels serve to expose violence, showcase resistance efforts, and foster civic engagement. Furthermore, inter-institutional forums like round tables and public campaigns have been established to advocate for the dignity of social leaders through an intersectional approach.

3.4. Psychosocial support and collective care for the protection of EHRDs

In *"The psychosocial approach applied to the protection of human rights defenders"*, PI argues that protection without care is incomplete. Equally important, collective protection is fundamentally about building the power and safeguarding the social relationships that define a collective. Therefore, psychosocial accompaniment and collective care should be part of a comprehensive strategy to protect EHRDs.

Acts of mutual support - such as community healing spaces, food sovereignty initiatives, and collective mental, emotional, and spiritual aid - should be essential pillars of defenders' security, resilience, and their ability to sustain struggles for land, rights, and life. Collective

“ *We must care, not just as individuals, but collectively. Self-care is not a luxury. Collective care is not optional. Both are essential if we want defenders to stay safe and effective in the long term”.*

care is a deliberate strategy that underlies the stability of movements. This often-invisible labour that holds groups together must be formally recognised and appropriately funded, treating it with the same prioritisation as any other protection strategy.

EHRDs face additional mental health consequences, including grief, as a result of

the impact of extractive industries on their land, water, and oceans, and of the changes caused by the climate crisis. This **grief** can be prevalent, even in the absence of physical violence, as EHRDs mourn the loss of their livelihoods, indigenous seeds, genetic resources, and ecological knowledge.



Psychosocial support for community organisations, Guatemala

In Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, PI Mesoamérica provided psychosocial support to community organisations made of women who sought to stop the contamination of rivers and other water sources and prevent the dispossession of their territories.

PI Mesoamerica's psychosocial support has profoundly shifted participants' perspectives, and created a space that allows them to release their burdens, recognise they are not alone, and find the strength to move forward together.

Woman EHRD 1: *"From where I was at the beginning to where I am now, I can feel a change. Normally, one wants to run away from problems or illnesses, for example, but the support I receive here helps me to keep fighting. The space is useful for being able to carry on in difficult times. I feel and appreciate that this space belongs to us women."*

Woman EHRD 2: *"Problems have always existed and will always exist, but with these spaces I can strengthen myself and prepare to continue fighting. Even though it can sometimes be difficult to get there, it is important to find a way to reach these spaces. They are especially nourishing for us women who cannot read or write."*

PI's office in Thailand has witnessed how the agency of EHRDs often emerges through informal, deeply rooted leadership. It is reflected in daily acts of resistance: organising, feeding others, storytelling, or refusing silence. PI's psychosocial support and accompaniment means standing in solidarity beside EHRDs. It is a commitment to walk alongside people, while recognising their agency, their pain, and their power.



PI Thailand's office on their approach to psychosocial support

In Thailand, EHRDs face SLAPPs, surveillance, harassment—and deep exhaustion. Crucially, the wounds are not always visible, manifesting as fear, guilt, numbness, and isolation. For this reason, PI's psychosocial

accompaniment is:

- Non-clinical but based on solidarity;
- Grounded in feminist and decolonial practice;
- Focused on collective strength, not individual pathology.

We acknowledge and respect lived experience. We believe what defenders say about risk, burnout, and hope, even when such accounts deviate from established analytical frameworks. We practice solidarity; our engagement extends beyond mere visits. We actively listen, advocate, bear witness, and amplify their voices.

We support:

- The cultivation of shared enjoyment, humor, and collective joy;
- The establishment of listening circles and rituals for mourning;
- Feminist approaches to healing that integrate both grief and joy;
- Care environments that recognise defenders as complete individuals, rather than solely instruments of struggle.

In our methodology:

- Laughter is employed as a strategic measure;
- Singing and dancing constitute forms of protest;
- Joy is regarded as a facet of resistance;
- Psychosocial accompaniment is not a passive measure; it is strategically vital;
- This approach contributes to the dignified sustenance of resistance;
- We also propose a streamlined "Crisis and Care" movement cohort, an interregional platform for learning to deepen this collective practice.

Collectively, we:

- Prepare meals for one another prior to court proceedings;
- Engage in shared grieving following disappearances and losses;
- Rear children while concurrently defending ecological resources such as forests, rivers, and land;
- Receive care from traditional healers utilising botanical remedies and ancestral knowledge;
- Document violations and engage in expressive dance concurrently;
- Generate joy and foster healing in the context of repression.



Mutual Support Meetings in Guatemala

The objective of these Mutual Support Meetings, facilitated by PI Mesoamérica, is to create spaces for women EHRDs, building trust so they can freely discuss issues they would not address in mixed groups. Psychosocial support helps women EHRDs see reality in a different way. Realities do not change. What changes is how women EHRDs deal with their emotions in order to make the right decisions. Psychosocial support has enabled them to become aware of their emotional problems and, through sharing, collective healing processes are initiated.

The rules of the Mutual Support Meetings:

1. No advice is given
2. We speak from experience
3. What is said here stays here
4. We respect each other
5. We show solidarity

Conclusion

EHRDs confront complex and interwoven disabling factors that hamper their efforts to protect both people and the planet. While they deal with the same core threats encountered by all HRDs, their specific circumstances and operating contexts significantly exacerbate these difficulties. These threats are amplified by systemic failures in governance, specifically the lack of effective, specific protective legal frameworks and states' lack of - or weak, at best - political commitment to enforce existing instruments, particularly those international protections that lack binding effect.

In light of these heightened and compounded dangers, in this paper, PI put forward some approaches focused on creating a secure and enabling environment for the vital activism of EHRDs. PI further proposed that the core components of any preventative effort to protect EHRDs must include collective protection, of which protection networks are a core dimension, positive narratives, and psychosocial support. These approaches and strategies are, however, merely blueprints; they cannot succeed without strong actions and commitments from all actors involved in the protection of EHRDs, as well as the implementation of multi-faceted, collaborative and context-specific actions to address the web of risks, threats and obstacles that EHRDs face from a variety of actors. While stakeholder coordination is critical, the paramount importance lies in ensuring that EHRDs are placed at the centre of all relevant protection initiatives.

As the triple planetary crisis (pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change) gains ground and as scientists increasingly ring the alarm bell, the protection of EHRDs and their vital work should be a priority for all. States should implement and uphold their international human rights obligations. We must decisively hold corporations accountable for the violations they commit, and confront the attacks perpetrated by other non-state actors, whether legal or illegal. The principle that human and environmental interests must take priority over business profits is not up for debate. It is an imperative that all stakeholders - from governments to the private sector to civil society - act upon immediately.

Upholding the protection of EHRDs and their right to defend human and environmental rights is a long-term and collective endeavour. Collaboration among all actors is vital, for the safeguarding of EHRDs is inextricably linked to the protection of our planet, and ultimately, the defense of our own future.

Recommendations



To state authorities

- Legislate binding human rights and environmental due diligence obligations for businesses, explicitly requiring risk assessments, mitigation plans and monitoring mechanisms of impacts on EHRDs and IPLCs. Such legislation should also include clear and transparent processes for collecting and addressing their questions and concerns.
- Legally recognise, secure, and formally demarcate customary land of IPLCs, by providing them with collective land titles and enforceable legal standing to defend their territories.
- Enshrine the principle of FPIC into national law as a mandatory requirement for all projects affecting IPLC lands, resources, or livelihoods.
- Adopt policies to confront organised crime operating in remote rural and forest areas. Such policies should follow a dual strategy: 1) robust law enforcement to dismantle illicit economic structures (e.g., illegal resource extraction, drug and other illicit trades) and corruption that fuel violence against IPLCs and EHRDs; and 2) comprehensive support to actively safeguard the communal resilience, thereby contributing to their collective protection.
- Provide mandatory, specialised training for judges, prosecutors and public officials on environmental law, jurisprudence protecting forms of collective property and ancestral possession, human rights law, with special modules addressing the criminalisation and gendered risks faced by EHRDs, as well as the specific challenges faced by EHRDs.
- Develop and implement national programmes for the protection of EHRDs and risk analysis frameworks that move beyond individual security to adopt a gendered and collective protection lens.
- Recognise the legal rights of nature and explore mechanisms at both national and international levels to enshrine nature's rights in law.



To business actors

- Integrate collective, intersectional, and gender-just protection of EHRDs into all corporate human rights and environmental due diligence processes. Companies must consider EHRDs as essential partners in environmental governance and democratic accountability — not as risks to be managed.
- Adopt and enforce a policy of zero tolerance for reprisals and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) against EHRDs across all tiers of operations and supply chains. This policy must be accompanied by transparent reporting, independent oversight, and public accountability mechanisms ensuring that neither the company nor its subsidiaries, contractors, or investors are complicit in retaliation.
- Establish independent, accessible, and effective grievance mechanisms at both corporate and project levels, designed in consultation with EHRDs and IPLCs. These mechanisms must be gender-responsive, culturally appropriate, and capable of

addressing collective as well as individual harm, with remedies that are timely, transformative, and rooted in the right to an effective remedy under international law.

- Operationalise FPIC as a binding, non-derogable standard for all activities that may affect IPLCs. FPIC must move beyond formal consultation to shared decision-making and consent-based participation, ensuring communities have the power to withhold consent and to determine their own development priorities in line with their customary laws and collective rights.



To financial institutions

- Make access to capital conditional on proven compliance with robust EHRD protection and FPIC standards — including transparent due diligence, community consent, and redress mechanisms.

- Integrate comprehensive environmental and social risk lenses into all investment assessments to prevent financing projects that perpetuate ecological destruction or contribute to human rights violations against EHRDs and IPLCs.



To donors

- Actively fund and facilitate the meaningful participation of grassroots EHRDs and IPLC representatives in key international and regional fora.

- Shift funding paradigms from short-term, reactive security to long-term protection.



To CSOs supporting EHRDs

- Establish durable alliances between human rights, labour and environmental organisations to advance joint advocacy and legal defense initiatives campaigns, as well as legal support initiatives in favor of EHRDs.

- Partner with EHRD collectives to map their protection ecosystems identifying interconnections and areas needing capacity support.

- Support EHRD and IPLC efforts in communication for protection by developing powerful new narratives and strategic communication support. This effort must aim to legitimise their critical role as environmental protectors among the broader public in their countries, shifting the public conversation to one focused on their resistance, dignity, and the necessity of defending life.

- Support EHRDs in establishing clear network protocols for rapid emergency assistance, national and international alerts, and access to expert advice (legal, psychosocial).



To EHRDs and IPLCs

- Strategically implement self-care, acknowledging it as a necessity, not a luxury. Integrate self-care into community actions to prevent burnout and ensure sustained resistance.

- Build emotional resilience collectively through the creation of safe spaces and mutual support circles to process trauma, share strength, and heal together.

- Maintain meticulous records of environmental harm, threats, and attacks for easier reporting. This is crucial for legal defense (especially against SLAPPs or judicial harassment) and international advocacy.
- Work with network allies to collectively mobilise legal defense, media outreach, and solidarity campaigns when facing lawsuits.
- Develop community-led communication plans to break isolation and strengthen solidarity, and strategically share stories of courage, humour, and daily acts of resistance. This integrated approach should aim to deter aggressors while simultaneously reframing and dismantling negative labels (such as “anti-development actors” or “enemies of the state”) by showing the broader public the true, positive identity and purpose of EHRDs.
- Strengthen internal community relationships and foster trust and dense relationships among members.
- Proactively build external networks (“dense web of relationships”):
 - Connect with local, national, and international CSOs, intergovernmental bodies, donors, academia, and religious institutions.
 - Engage with embassies and other diplomatic missions, and with governmental and state protection institutions and mechanisms, as appropriate.
 - Link with national and international alternative media and opinion makers.
- Establish clear network protocols for rapid emergency assistance, national and international alerts, and access to expert advice (legal, psychosocial).

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