



HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE HEART OF THE RESPONSE

# HUMAN RIGHTS, THE ENVIRONMENT AND COVID-19

Key Messages



COVID-19  
RESPONSE



UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

## KEY MESSAGES ON HUMAN RIGHTS THE ENVIRONMENT AND COVID-19

*The COVID-19 crisis reveals a clear truth about catastrophic risk in an increasingly globalized world: an effective response requires immediate, ambitious and evidence-based preventive action at the international level. To avert future global threats, including pandemics, we must protect rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment upon which we all depend for our health and wellbeing. A human rights-based approach to the COVID-19 crisis is also needed to address its unequal impacts on the poor, vulnerable and marginalized and its underlying drivers, including environmental degradation. The following key messages on human rights, the environment and COVID-19 highlight essential human rights obligations and responsibilities of States and others, including businesses, in addressing and responding to the COVID-19 crisis.*



# 01

## Fulfil The Right To A Healthy Environment

Environmental degradation and biodiversity loss create the conditions for an increase in the type of animal-to-human zoonosis that can result in viral epidemics. They also contribute to pre-existing medical conditions, such as asthma, that make persons more vulnerable to viral infections.

More than 150 countries recognize the right to a safe, clean and healthy environment in some form. The substantive elements of this right include a safe climate, water and sanitation, clean air, healthy and sustainably produced food, non-toxic environments, healthy ecosystems and biodiversity. These elements are prerequisites for human health and resilience in the face of illness and for reducing the risk of zoonosis and expansion of existing disease vectors.

According to the Human Rights Committee, environmental degradation is one of “the most pressing and serious threats to the ability of present and future generations to enjoy the right to life” and protecting the human right to life “depends on measures taken by States parties to protect the environment”. The COVID-19 response should respect, protect and fulfil rights to a healthy environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic should push us all to rethink our interactions with nature and wildlife. Around 60 percent of all infectious diseases and 75 percent of all emerging infectious diseases in humans, including COVID-19, are zoonotic.

On average, one new infectious disease emerges in humans every four months. Ecosystem integrity is the foundation of human health and development. Human-induced environmental changes modify wildlife population structure and reduce biodiversity, resulting in new conditions that favour particular hosts, vectors, and/or pathogens.

Integrating the human right to a healthy environment in key environmental agreements and processes, such as the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, is critical to a holistic response to COVID-19 that includes a reconceptualization of the relationship between people and nature that will reduce risks and prevent future harms from environmental degradation.

# 02

## Re-Think Our Interactions With Nature

# 03

## **Protect Those Living In Poverty Or Subject To Discrimination**

The poor and marginalized are among those worst impacted by both COVID-19 and environmental harms such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution that threaten full and effective enjoyment of all human rights.

Environmental harms disproportionately impact individuals, groups and peoples already living in vulnerable situations – including women, children, the poor, minorities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. Crises such as COVID-19 amplify those impacts, including through adverse effects on access to food and land, water and sanitation, housing, livelihoods, decent work, healthcare and other basic necessities.

Fulfilling human rights, including the human right to a healthy environment, not only reduces disproportionate impacts, it also fosters more resilient societies. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that society can only be as healthy as its most vulnerable members. The COVID-19 response should address inequalities and focus on protection of persons in vulnerable situations in order to leave no one behind.

The COVID-19 crisis requires us to reconsider the policies and practices that have contributed to our current situation. Rather than rolling back environmental laws and policies, it is time to step up environmental protection and enforcement in order to create resilience and reduce future pandemic risks, bearing in mind that short-term economic gains from deregulation often come at long-term costs.

States should recognize the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment in their constitutional and legislative frameworks, with effective remedies for violations of this right. At practical level, States can, for example, strengthen efforts to combat illegal trade in wildlife – reducing potential avenues for zoonosis and promoting the rule of law while ensuring alternative and sustainable livelihoods.

Tourism fees often fund parks and conservation efforts. The COVID-19 crisis jeopardizes this revenue stream and funding against poaching, illegal wildlife trade and other forms of prohibited exploitation of natural resources, placing increased pressure on natural systems. Effective and inclusive conservation efforts are essential to protect healthy ecosystems and the communities that depend on them.

Environmental human rights defenders are essential allies in efforts to protect the environment and, by extension, human health during the COVID-19 crisis. Action is needed to protect both the environment and its defenders including, in many cases, Indigenous Peoples, whose worldviews and traditional knowledge can bring critical perspectives for sustainable and rights-based development. Limitations on civic space undermine the crucial advocacy of environmental human rights defenders, which in turn can pave the way for short-sighted and dangerous actions. Defenders should be empowered and protected from threats, reprisals, and harassment, including as relating to emergency decrees and legislation.

# 04

## **Strengthen Environmental Rule Of Law And Protect Environmental Human Rights Defenders**

# 05

## **Guarantee Meaningful And Informed Participation**

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international human rights instruments establish that participation and access to information are human rights. The importance of participation and access to information in environmental matters has been frequently reaffirmed, including by Rio Principle 10, the Paris Agreement, the Aarhus Convention and the Escazù Agreement.

Governments and businesses should be transparent in sharing relevant information related to their efforts to address environmental and health crises and ensuring the informed participation of all persons in decision-making processes that affect them. During this crisis, Governments and the international community should find new ways and modalities of working. Environmental governance should be modernized, including through inclusive and rights-based tools for digital participation and access to information, ensuring that essential environmental decision-making continues in an inclusive and effective manner regardless of the exigencies posed by COVID-19.

Meaningful, informed and effective participation of all people is not just their human right, it also leads to more effective, equitable and inclusive environmental action. Drawing on the diverse interests, needs and expertise of all people, including women and girls, local communities and indigenous peoples, offers important insights for inclusive and sustainable environmental action. The COVID-19 crisis should be a catalyst for further democratization of environmental decision-making at all levels through improved use of digital space and inclusive consultative processes.

The COVID-19 response has led to increased use of medical supplies, including testing kits and protective equipment, as well as packaging/delivery supplies such as single use plastics. Effective and comprehensive waste management, including medical, household and other hazardous waste, is critical to minimize possible secondary impacts on health and the environment caused by the COVID-19 response.

The poorest, most vulnerable and marginalized communities without access to waste management or sanitation infrastructure have been, and will continue to be, hit the hardest by secondary effects on health, livelihood and rights. Preventing environmental harm and ensuring the full and effective implementation of basic human rights such as those to health, a healthy environment, and water and sanitation, is critical to prevent and minimize the risk of infectious diseases.

States and other duty-bearers should ensure the safe handling and disposal of waste as a vital component of an effective and comprehensive emergency response and treat waste management, including of medical, household and other hazardous waste, as an urgent and essential public service. Effective and equitable management of biomedical and health-care waste should be guaranteed through appropriate identification, collection, separation, storage, transportation, treatment, protection, training and disposal.

# 06

## **Minimize The Harmful Impacts Of Medical Waste**



# 07

## Build Back Better

A rights-based approach to the COVID-19 recovery and response requires that we build back better and more sustainably. Economic stimulus packages should protect and benefit the most vulnerable while advancing efforts to fulfil human rights, achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, and limit global heating to the greatest extent possible.

The response to the crisis presents an opportunity to support improved social protection measures, and a just transition to a sustainable, no-carbon economy founded on renewable energy, environmentally sound technology, sustainable resource use, community empowerment and livelihoods of dignity.

States should work jointly and individually to mobilize the maximum available resources toward building back better. Country-level socioeconomic impact analysis of COVID-19, the Common Country Analysis, UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights are important entry points for building back better and for operationalizing the human right to a healthy environment.

The rights of all people to benefit from science and its applications must also be safeguarded ensuring that solutions to global problems, like a vaccine for COVID-19 or environmentally sound technologies, are equitably shared by all. Over the long run, inclusive, sustainable and equitable economies are more robust.

All States have an obligation to pursue development that benefits both people and the planet and equitably distribute the benefits thereof. Businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights and it is also in their best interest to pursue sustainable development.

In the face of global risks, rapid, evidence-based, participatory and collective action not only produces the best results, it is also fulfilling human rights obligations. Effective responses to COVID-19 and environmental crises should be global responses grounded in solidarity, compassion, respect for human dignity and ecological integrity.

The required actions and international cooperation must build on obligations of States and other duty-bearers in international legal frameworks and instruments such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Declaration on the Right to Development, and the Rio Declaration.

Collaboration between governments, international partners, civil society, activists, the private sector, and all individuals and peoples are needed to fulfil human rights, including rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and to achieve sustainable development that equitably meets the needs of present and future generations.

# 08

## Learn From The COVID-19 Crisis