

Environmental sustainability and human rights

WWF contribution to the UN online consultation on Environmental Sustainability

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International efforts aiming to protect and conserve natural capital and bring about environmentally sustainable development are closely interlinked with the rights of people to secure their livelihoods, enjoy healthy and productive ecosystems and live with dignity. A human rights-based approach to development will help the achievement of environmental sustainability and should be one of the core principles guiding the post-2015 development framework. This contribution highlights the interconnections between environmental sustainability and human rights, aiming to inform the global conversation on the post-2015 development agenda.

The achievement of human rights and environmental sustainability, including biodiversity and natural resource conservation, are interrelated fundamental goals of the global community and interact on several levels in the context of international development. First, **human rights-based approach can support sustainable and equitable management of natural resources by empowering people and communities.** Human rights affecting environmental policy-making and management, called procedural rights, enable individuals, groups and CSOs to participate in decision-making, providing them with access to information, judicial remedies and political processes and facilitating the realization of other rights. Those human rights, including the right to freedom of expression and association, right to information and participation in decision-making processes and right to access to justice, provide people with means to influence decisions related to the management of the natural resources and are an important factor in reducing vulnerability to environmental crises. While inclusive and participatory environmental decision-making processes do not guarantee sustainable outcomes, they have the potential to build public support for environmentally sound policies by disseminating relevant information and giving voice to local communities, including those directly dependent on natural resources for their survival and those most vulnerable to environmental hazards and risks.

Second, **environmental conservation and governance contributes positively to the realization of some fundamental human rights by ensuring equitable access to healthy and resilient ecosystems for the provision of services such as clean water and air, food, climate regulation and disease management.** Human rights such as the right to life, to health, to property, to water, to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food and housing, the right to work and to practice one's culture, are vulnerable to environmental degradation and environmental sustainability may often be a precondition to their realisation. This is true for both the urban and rural poor, especially women. The livelihoods of the rural poor often depend directly on natural resources and ecosystem services, and their enjoyment of substantive human rights is most at risk from environmental hazards, e.g.

those related to climate change, such as changing rainfall patterns and more frequent extreme weather events. Urban dwellers, particularly those living in informal settlements located in hazard-prone areas, are disproportionately at risk from natural disasters, their vulnerability further exacerbated by the growing population and urbanization, threatening the fulfilment of their human rights.

Environmental degradation resulting from unsustainable resource management and pollution infringes on the human right to a healthy environment. The human right to a healthy (or satisfactory, safe, or sustainable) environment is referenced in numerous national constitutions and regional conventions, as well as recognized by the UN human rights bodies. Environmental sustainability is vital to long-term human development within the planetary boundaries. The sustained functioning of societies and economies depends on the functioning of their natural environments; without access to basic human rights such as water, food and health, people cannot effectively participate in development.

It is important to ensure that conservation activities do not- generate negative impacts by limiting people's access to land and other vital natural resources, and consequently their ability to fully enjoy their human rights. Lack of integrated natural capital management may create or fuel conflict over land, water and other resources and effectively undermine both conservation efforts and the ability of people to exercise their rights. An environmentally sustainable development agenda must therefore address the social impacts of both environmental degradation and natural resource management and provide for clear accountability measures in cases of human rights violations. Those measures could include the mechanisms for the prevention of environmental harm, dispute resolution, monitoring and compliance frameworks as well as access to environmental information and administrative and judicial remedies.