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BRIEF

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2019

# HLPF 2019 REVIEW OF SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE & STRONG INSTITUTIONS WWF BRIEFING

9–18 July 2019

## WWF Recommends

### ***Guaranteed safe civic space and an end to environmental corruption and crime to ensure empowerment, inclusivity and equity for local communities***

At HLPF 2019 under the theme of “empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”, WWF calls upon member states and all stakeholders to recognise and include the following elements as fundamental for the full and effective implementation of SDG 16 and related targets:

- Ensure the legal, regulatory and policy environment enables a **vibrant civil society** and empowers individuals and communities to **defend their rights** and build inclusive, equitable societies (*related targets: 1.4, 4.7, 5.1, 5.a, 5.c, 10.2, 10.3, 11.3, 15.2, 15.5*);
- Provide more robust guidance for Member States to **ensure that civil society can contribute to Voluntary National Reviews and SDGs implementation**. This could occur, for example, through transparent and formal multi-stakeholder processes, and regular and open communications on SDGs implementation (*related targets: 5.5, 5.a, 6.b, 10.2, 10.3, 11.3, 13.b, 17.17, 17.18*);
- **Address environmental corruption** by improving the integrity and transparency of government and private sector decision-making regarding natural resource management, particularly in fishing, forestry, freshwater, land use and wildlife management (*related targets: 6.5, 7.b, 10.1, 12.2, 12.6, 13.b, 14.2, 14.4, 14.7, 15.1, 15.2, 15.6, 15.7, 17.1, 17.17*);
- **Effectively enforce laws and reduce corruption to prevent environmental crime**, and take complementary action to protect the rights of local communities and improve their livelihood conditions. Wildlife crime deprives local communities of the long-term benefits from sustainable use of these resources. (*related targets: 1.3, 1.4, 10.2, 10.3, 14.2, 14.4, 14.6, 14.7, 14.b, Goal 15 targets*).
- **Ensure public access to information in relation to decision-making for sustainable development**, for instance in relation to infrastructure planning and procedures such as Strategic Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (*6.6, 7.2, 7.b, 9.1, 12.2, 14.c, 15.1, 15.5, 17.17*).

## *Background*

### **Guarantee safe civic space for the realisation of inclusivity and empowerment and the fulfilment of peaceful and equitable societies**

A vibrant and safe civic space, including access to justice, decision-making and transparent information, is an incontestable condition for the achievement of the SDGs. It creates the conditions necessary to empower inclusive, participative processes and accountability and for people to defend their individual and collective rights. It delivers on the promise to “Leave No One Behind” outlined in Agenda 2030. But the shrinking of civic space is a global phenomenon. Attacks on core civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression have increased in number and intensity. In the last two years alone, more than 40 laws were proposed or enacted by governments in at least 50 countries, aimed at restricting Civil Society Organisation (CSO) registration, operation, and funding (Amnesty International 2019).

Despite the protection afforded to them by human rights law, environmental human rights defenders increasingly face heightened risks and suffer grave violations of their rights in response to their defence of land, environment and indigenous rights. They are subjected to killings and detention, threats and intimidation, stigma and criminalization from State and non-State actors. The number of environmental human rights defenders killed every year is increasing, with 201 people killed in 2017 (Global Witness 2018). Indigenous, women and minority human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable. Environmental justice requires protection for these groups from environmental and health hazards, but equally as important, it requires their meaningful participation in decisions that affect the places in which they live, work, and practice spirituality.

Guaranteeing and respecting individual and collective rights, and the traditional institutions and values that have sustained stewardship of nature for centuries, is integral to the achievement of the SDGs in a number of ways, including for poverty alleviation, food security, health and wellbeing, economic growth, climate mitigation, preserving nature on land and below water and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

### **End environmental crime and corruption**

The abuse of power through corruption is a major driver of resource depletion and environmental crime, now the fourth largest crime sector and growing faster than the global economy. Corruption plays a major role in every aspect of environmental crime, including: facilitating the poaching of endangered species; the granting of illegal or fraudulent licences for logging and hunting; the transit and sale of ivory and other products to black markets across the world; and the thwarting of investigations and prosecutions. Preventing corruption is essential in order to confront this crime (UNODC 2015).

Illegal wildlife trade, including trade in high value timber and aquatic species, represents the largest direct threat to the future of many of the world’s most endangered species. It is threatening the integrity of many of the earth’s most precious protected and conserved areas that are inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. These resources, if well managed, provide tangible benefits to communities and contribute significantly to national economies and development objectives, including poverty alleviation, food security, viable livelihoods and human and environmental health.

Wildlife crime can have negative impacts on poor people, either because their natural resource base is being depleted, or through insecurity introduced by wildlife criminals. This undermines the capacity of rural and Indigenous communities to derive sustainable and equitable economic

benefits from their wildlife resources. While prices for illegal wildlife products rise sharply along the trade chain, those that harvest the wildlife often profit least from the trafficking.

### Promote the rule of law and build transparent and accountable institutions

The implementation of national and international rule of law on environmental matters remains a major concern and is one of the major challenges for halting biodiversity loss and for responding to climate change. As [UN Environment](#) notes, despite a 38-fold increase in environmental laws put in place since 1972, environmental compliance is still weak or non-existing in many countries due to factors such as poor enforcement, poor coordination across institutions, corruption, lack of resources and access to information, and increasing pressures on civic space. Reinforcing rule of law regarding environmental legislation not only contributes to the environmental SDGs but to other SDGs as well, for instance by creating a level playing field for businesses.

Transparent and accountable institutions are vital for sustainability. The recognition by citizens, businesses and civil society that government institutions are effective also makes it easier to get support for the long-term planning and investments needed to bring about transformative change for sustainability. This also counts for information about the resources allocated to the environment – for instance, most of the current expenditure on biodiversity conservation globally comes from domestic budgets but many countries still struggle to adequately articulate what resources they have committed to support their institutions to meet the environmental goals under the SDGs.

Lack of transparency around infrastructure plans and development undermines efforts for the public and NGOs to provide feedback on better upstream planning or options for governments to mitigate some of the worst environmental impacts that large scale infrastructure can have. Given the large investments in infrastructure needed to meet the SDGs over the next decade, transparent and inclusive processes around infrastructure planning and implementation are required if we are to mitigate some of the worst potential impacts on the environment.

### Ensure public access to environmental information

Public access to information is crucial for the informed contribution and participation of the public and key for decision-making for sustainable development. International treaties such as the Aarhus convention<sup>1</sup> and the Espoo convention<sup>2</sup>, along with basic freedom of information laws are critical for establishing clear frameworks for public participation in decision-making. Like for environmental legislation, although national and international agreements regulating access to information exist and are transposed in an increasing number of countries, they are suffering from poor implementation and constant breaches through, for instance, lengthy and complicated procedures for obtaining access to documents, short terms for public consultation or disregard of public input in decision-making. All these are restricting the space and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution of civil society to decision-making processes but also inhibit the capacity of NGOs to carry out their mandate.

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<sup>1</sup> The Aarhus Convention, or the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, is a United Nations Economic Commission for Europe convention which lays down a set of basic rules to promote the involvement of citizens in environmental matters and improve enforcement of environmental law.

<sup>2</sup> The Espoo Convention, or the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, is a United Nations Economic Commission for Europe convention which sets out the obligations of Parties to assess the environmental impact of certain activities at an early stage of planning.