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ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY IN EUROPE: ISSUES, THREATS, OPPORTUNITIES

Round-table with environmental human rights defenders and activists
organised by the Office of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Online event, 18 December 2020

REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
1 THE WORK OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS: THEMES, METHODS AND SUCCESS STORIES	5
2 CHALLENGES FACED BY ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, ACTIVISTS AND ORGANISATIONS: REPRISALS, RESTRICTIVE FRAMEWORKS AND RESPONSES.....	9
3 THE WAY FORWARD	11

1. The link between the environment and human rights is rapidly gaining currency in today's human rights discourse. It is increasingly widely accepted that environment and human rights are interdependent: living in an unhealthy environment -- or an environment negatively affected by human intervention or climate change -- may result in violations of human rights and, conversely, respect for human rights is vital for the protection of the environment.
2. The sense of an impending environmental emergency has galvanised many people in Europe and the world around a variety of initiatives demanding rights related to a clean and healthy environment. Environmental human rights defenders and activists are at the forefront of this struggle. However, they also often find themselves amongst those most at risk of persecution, intimidation or reprisals, notably because of the economic interests that their activities tend to impact.

Environment and human rights: the Council of Europe and state obligations

3. Within the Council of Europe and its various entities, there has been growing awareness of the need to tackle more proactively the issue of environment and human rights, and recent years have witnessed a welcome proliferation of activities in this field, hosted by the European Court of Human Rights,¹ the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers² and the Parliamentary Assembly,³ among others.
4. The Council of Europe bodies overseeing the implementation of the European Convention of Human Rights and the European Social Charter have produced an extensive body of case law that delineates states parties' obligations in the field of environmental protection. Despite the absence in the Convention of a specific reference to the environment, the European Court of Human Rights has clearly [established](#) that various types of environmental degradation can result in violations of substantive human rights, such as the right to life, to private and family life, the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment, and the peaceful enjoyment of the home. The Court's case-law shows that states should not only investigate violations and compensate individual victims, but that they also have an obligation to prevent such violations from occurring in the first place, including through general and precautionary measures to address environmental risks in a systemic manner.
5. Moreover, the European Committee of Social Rights has [interpreted](#) the right to health included in the Charter to encompass the right to a healthy environment. It has notably found that states parties must strive to overcome pollution within a reasonable time and using available resources by taking concrete steps and monitoring progress.
6. Importantly, states must also guarantee procedures that allow concerned individuals to take action when confronted with environmental degradation. These include the rights to receive information about environmental issues, to participate in decision-making processes impacting

¹"Human Rights for the Planet" conference, October 2020.

² High-level [conference](#) on "Environmental Protection and Human Rights", February 2020.

³ See e.g. Resolution 2210 (2018) on climate change and implementation of the Paris Agreement, adopted on 24 April 2018; Resolution 2286 (2019) on air pollution: a challenge for public health in Europe, adopted on 24 May 2019; and Resolution 2307 (2019) on a legal status for "climate refugees", adopted on 3 October 2019.

the environment, and to have access to effective justice. These rights, which are enshrined in the 1998 [Aarhus Convention](#), have also been affirmed in the case-law of the Court.⁴

7. The standards articulated by the Council of Europe bodies contribute to a broader set of international law⁵, as well as guidance by various international human rights monitoring bodies, regarding the link between human rights and the environment. The [16 Framework Principles of Human Rights and the Environment](#) issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment in 2018 give an overview of states' obligations in this area.

Environment and human rights: the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

8. The protection and promotion of environmental human rights is an issue of importance for the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović. The interlinked issues of environment and human rights have featured in the work of the Commissioner's office in several country contexts.⁶ In June 2019, the Commissioner published a human rights comment entitled "[Living in a clean environment: a neglected human rights concern for all of us](#)", and in February 2020 she delivered a [keynote speech](#) at a high-level conference on "Environmental Protection and Human Rights", welcoming the growing awareness of the link between protecting the environment and respecting human rights.
9. In parallel, support for the work of human rights defenders, their protection, and the development of an enabling environment for their activities lie at the core of the Commissioner's mandate. In December 2018, the Commissioner organised in Helsinki a round-table meeting with human rights defenders entitled "Human Rights Defenders in the Council of Europe Area: Current Challenges and Possible Solutions".
10. Building on the Helsinki event and on her work on environment and human rights, on 18 December 2020 the Commissioner convened an online round-table with environmental human rights defenders.⁷ The event gathered 14 participants, including lawyers, activists and representatives of both local and international NGOs, hailing from 10 European countries and having experience with a wide array of environmental issues, from deforestation and coal mining to litigation and youth engagement on climate change.
11. The round-table was an opportunity for participants to discuss specific problems faced by environmental human rights defenders and activists, examine possible solutions to these problems, exchange and learn from one another, and to help to select areas where the Commissioner could bring most added value in the future.
12. The present report summarises the discussions held during the round-table, and does not attempt to cover all relevant issues related to environment and human rights. Section 1 addresses the major trends in the area of environmental human rights in Europe, as well as examples of tools, working methods, good practices and success stories in the participants' work. Section 2 outlines

⁴ See, for example, [Guerra and Others v. Italy](#) (1998); [Giacomelli v. Italy](#) (2006); [Di Sarno v. Italy](#) (2012); [Öneryildiz v. Turkey](#) (2004) and [Fadeyeva v. Russia](#) (2005).

⁵ For example: [Stockholm Declaration](#) of 1972, [Rio Declaration](#) of 1992, [Paris Agreement](#) of 2015

⁶ For example: Report on Special Mission to [Kosovo](#) (2009); statement on [Romania](#) (2012); and [third-party intervention](#) before the European Court of Human Rights in a case against Russia (2017)

⁷ The term "environmental human rights defenders" is used here to refer to human rights defenders working in environmental matters. They work for a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment on which the enjoyment of human rights depends. Individuals may fall in this category regardless of whether or not they self-identify as human rights defenders; for some of them, the human rights dimension of their work may not necessarily be immediately apparent, or their identity may be more clearly tied to their community or to the environmental causes that they pursue.

the discussion regarding the challenges faced by environmental human rights defenders, including participants' experiences with facing or countering reprisals and restrictive frameworks. Section 3 tackles the way forward, and in particular the participants' views on the areas and themes where the Commissioner's action and voice, along with those of other international institutions, would be most beneficial.

13. The Commissioner wishes to express her sincere gratitude to the participants of this round-table for their valuable contributions to the discussions.

1 THE WORK OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS: THEMES, METHODS AND SUCCESS STORIES

14. The first session of the round-table intended to review some of the current trends in the area of environment and human rights in Europe, with particular focus on areas where the participants and their organisations are involved or would be keen to see bigger involvement of the international community.

Litigation and legal tools

15. Several participants highlighted the use of litigation and legal action as an important tool in fighting for environmental protection. This includes classic environmental legal interventions, such as challenging permits and construction plans, as well as bigger litigation against states, best exemplified by the *Urgenda Foundation vs. the Netherlands* case, which led to the landmark ruling in 2019 ordering the country's government to do more to cut carbon emissions.
16. Of particular note was the increasing link between environmental litigation and human rights law, since a purely environmental approach to litigation has shown its limits. Participants noted the benefits of a human rights approach, including the wider spectrum of fora to bring cases and of legal remedies. The case that reached the Supreme Court in Norway in November 2020 was emblematic, as it used the right to a healthy environment enshrined in the country's constitution to challenge licenses for new oil explorations. Similarly, and with a much wider scope, the case brought by six Portuguese youth to the European Court of Human Rights in September 2020 against 33 state parties, arguing that forest fires caused by global warming have negatively impacted their living conditions and health, showed the potential of linking environmental litigation with human rights.
17. Many participants described as a success story their recent focus on litigation, as opposed to other traditional methods of advocacy. In some cases, local environmental watchdogs now spent as much as 90% on their funds on litigation, bringing hundreds of cases against governments or private companies. They explained that they spent many years doing advocacy, but that while this type of activity raises awareness, its efficacy was often short-lived because once the spotlight was removed, the environmentally-damaging projects would continue. Exposing the malfeasance through courts was now the only real way to try to stop, or slow down, the environmental degradation their countries faced.
18. At the same time, some participants pointed to clear limitations with the litigation avenue. Environmental harm is often very diffused, making it hard to prove the link between the degradation and the harm to a specific individual or community. The cost of litigation was also identified as a major downside of this approach: once an organization goes through one such case, it often faces financial challenges that make the often necessary additional work to really hold

governments or private companies accountable impossible. Alarming, activists also reported tactics that governments use to continue environmentally-damaging activities despite court orders having been issued against them, a circumstance that in addition to exposing rule of law shortcomings, also leaves local civil society groups with limited options for redress and often demoralized.

Economic drivers for environmental degradation

19. Another trend observed by many participants in different forms was the use of economic arguments to relegate the importance of environmental concerns. This manifests itself in different ways across Europe. In countries with high oil or coal reserves, governments push for continued drilling and mining because of the export potential, rather than domestic need; where the economic comparative advantage lies with financial services, then the sector's investments and contribution to emissions is often overlooked. In these cases, participants observed, it is not enough to look at a specific country's direct carbon emissions: their contribution to emissions elsewhere, whether through exports of raw materials or financing, should be taken into account as well.
20. The insistence of numerous Council of Europe member states to continue to allow coal exploration or extraction has also led to an increase in local movements against this damaging practice, communities directly affected by the mining holding demonstrations and trying to stand up to the harmful environmental effects of such activities. Participants noted private companies' repeated requests for permits allowing them to discharge harmful substances, which would allow them not only to pollute delicate ecosystems such as rivers and forests, but also to put individuals as far away as 60 kilometres from the facility at risk of respiratory diseases, due to the crushing of the waste rock.
21. Activists noted that as a general rule, they see economic development taking precedence over environmental concerns at all levels of decision-making. In less economically developed parts of Europe in particular, governments prioritize attracting foreign direct investments no matter the environmental costs. Tourism-related infrastructure developments are allowed to proceed notwithstanding local protests about their negative environmental effects, which range from disturbing wildlife migratory patterns to limiting the general public's access to waterfronts. In some cases, participants noted, harmful developments were pushed by either businesses with close ties to the ruling parties or members of parliament, raising serious corruption and ethical issues.

Shrinking civic space

22. The shrinking space for civil society engagement in many European countries was also raised by participants as a factor impacting the work of environmental human rights defenders. There is a trend of civil society groups being viewed suspiciously by governments, who pass laws specifically to limit their scope of action. Given the economic interests that their activities tend to impact, environmental activists are often the first to be targeted in this respect.
23. So-called "foreign agent laws", for example, have been reducing the ability of non-governmental actors to operate, and environmental activists have been disproportionately affected. As a result, some organisations avoid official registration altogether, and others simply close. Taking it one step further, some laws allow the government to directly label and stigmatise any individual who carries out legitimate civil society activities, including in the fields of human rights and environmental protection, and to apply punitive measures against those individuals.

24. In addition, developments with harmful environmental impacts are sometimes labelled by governments as of “strategic importance”, thereby fast-tracking procedures and leaving no space for public consultations or civil society involvement. These kinds of shortcuts limit environmental human rights defenders’ abilities to speak up for the common good.
25. Importantly, participants also stressed the constant and disproportionate criminalization of protest movements fighting against environmentally damaging projects, including the illegal use of collective liability to target all participants in largely peaceful demonstrations when some harm is inflicted on a law enforcement representative, for example. More generally, environmental activists have seen their basic right to freedom of assembly and association regularly violated in many Council of Europe member states.

Transparency

26. Round-table participants stressed that it is hard to exaggerate the importance of access to information for environmental human rights defenders. To this end, the Aarhus Convention, which establishes signatory states’ obligations regarding the public’s right to environmental information, to participate in environmental decision-making and to access justice, was seen as an important instrument to be implemented and reinforced. Nonetheless, several participants identified the lack of information for communities affected by environmentally-damaging projects as a major problem in many Council of Europe member states. Often, people affected by harmful environmental projects simply have no knowledge of the very fact that they are affected, and once they request to know more, they are faced with administrative and legal barriers. This lack of access to information is, in many cases, what causes individuals to take to the streets to protest in the first place.
27. In some countries, laws on access to information have been altered to make it more complicated for citizens to make requests. NGOs routinely have to go to court to enforce freedom of information requests, and governments have used many pretexts, including related to the COVID-19 pandemic, to extend the timeframe for responding to these requests.
28. Compliance mechanisms, such as the Aarhus Convention one, can be used by environmental rights defenders when facing difficulties related to access to information or justice. While these processes can be slow, an advantage of resorting to compliance mechanisms vis-à-vis litigation is that they usually also include follow-up action by the responsible committee after a decision has been taken.

Complementarity of methods

29. Round-table participants reflected in numerous occasions about the variety of working methods available to environmental human rights defenders, and how it is important, in many instances, to combine different tools or approaches. For instance, while litigation can bring significant legal results, it will be harder to talk about the nuances of a just transition away from fossil fuels in a court case. In a campaign where a wide array of stakeholders are involved, on the other hand, successful court decisions can be built upon to ensure no one is left behind as economies transition towards renewable sources of energy.
30. Public opinion plays an instrumental role in the success of environmental actions, whether they be lawsuits, or campaigns targeting policy or opposing specific projects. Involving the wider public in the debate was therefore noted as an important element. To this end, the role of the media was also widely cited: investigative journalists can help uncover harmful environmental practices, and regular reporting can help campaigns reach higher visibility.

31. Participants, however, also noted the flip side of the media factor in environmental campaigns. Publications, particularly in regional or local markets, are hesitant to publish coverage of protests or other negative news regarding companies responsible for environmental degradation when these same companies are paying for advertisement. Leveraging their financial prowess, private actors have found ways to limit the media's potential to help activists amplify their message, gain broader local support, and protect environmental human rights.
32. Environmental human rights defenders have also leveraged public opinion as a tool by using "name and shame" advocacy, particularly vis-à-vis private companies. Once a civil society organization has some level of visibility, maintaining a list of businesses who fail to meet environmental standards in a particular country or region can help persuade companies to address concerns or at least engage in dialogue.
33. Some participants discussed how their organisations' strategies had evolved over time, in order to adapt to what could prove most effective to reach their goals. In some cases, after years of focusing on organizing protests that didn't ultimately prove very successful in achieving change on the ground, some groups started to engage more with state and regional authorities, leading to tangible results on establishing protected natural areas, for example.

Coalition-building

34. Coalition-building was mentioned several times during the round-table as a best practice for environmental civil society organisations. This ensures one organisation's struggle is not isolated from other geographically or thematically aligned causes, and can be amplified through similar efforts.
35. Participants noted that joining forces with international NGOs had proved a successful strategy, leveraging local connections with wider expertise and potential funding. Such partnerships have led to successful complaints in front of international bodies, such as the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, and the European Court of Human Rights.
36. On the flip side, zooming in rather than out, supporting local initiatives opposing harmful environmental developments in their neighborhoods has also proven to be a successful tactic for some bigger organisations. With trainings, guidance, and capacity building, civil society organisations can empower voices who are most directly affected. Participants shared several examples in their national contexts, from local opposition to waterfront developments to a successful campaign involving fishermen and inhabitants of remote islands to avoid oil exploration in the area.
37. Coalition-building can also protect environmental human rights defenders from judicial and public relations attacks by governments or private actors, which work best if the target is successfully isolated from broader civil society (see more in the next section). Assembling a coalition involving different credible stakeholders, who can speak out in solidarity and support of one another, can be critical for the ability to continue defending environmental rights when faced with reprisals and restrictive environments.

2 CHALLENGES FACED BY ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, ACTIVISTS AND ORGANISATIONS: REPRISALS, RESTRICTIVE FRAMEWORKS AND RESPONSES

38. Environmental human rights defenders participating in the round-table outlined a shocking myriad of ways in which private and government actors have purposefully limited their scope of action – at best – or targeted them and other activists with violent physical, verbal and cyber attacks – at worst –, underscoring the extent to which defending the defenders is still of utmost importance, and a moral and political imperative, in Europe.

Reprisals

39. Numerous participants, hailing from different corners of the continent, described how people bringing truth to light on environmental issues or peacefully opposing damaging projects are suffering greatly, facing, as one described it, “a war on all fronts”: physical safety, online threats and smear campaigns, cyber attacks, illegal surveillance and lawsuits, all geared towards intimidating activists and slowing down their activities.
40. Environmental activists report being followed, being verbally and physically attacked, and receiving death threats. In some countries, beatings, threats and intimidation tactics are unfortunately commonplace for environmental campaigners. A participant in the round-table described being beaten almost to death.
41. The role of law enforcement was especially in focus during this session. Some participants mentioned reporting such violence and harassment to the police, with no action taken, a sharp contrast to the flurry of law enforcement activity around peaceful picketing in the same area. A participant described how, after he was attacked and needed hospital care, the authorities’ investigation into the incident did not lead to any result – even though there were records of the perpetrator calling the victim’s phone, there was CCTV camera footage, and material evidence at the scene which could have been used to identify him.
42. Another concrete example provided by an environmental campaigner revolved around a visit with a television crew to an area where the natural habitat was being damaged by private entities: when the activist, having faced threats and attacks in the past, called a contact in the police to warn him about his visit, the officer advised him not to proceed, as there was a bounty on his head and the police wouldn’t be able to guarantee his protection. In fact, this inability or unwillingness of law enforcement in some Council of Europe member states to guarantee the safety and protection of environmental activists has caused a number of activists to leave their own countries and to continue their work from abroad.
43. Many attacks are perpetrated by unknown assailants. But in some member states, participants reported government security agencies raiding their offices and seizing equipment.
44. The range of attacks doesn’t end in the physical space. Several participants noted how environmental human rights defenders regularly face various types of cyberbullying and cyber-attacks. Activists have had their emails and computers hacked as a result of their campaigning. Online smearing is common, with articles posted online trying to tarnish the reputation of individuals or organisations who are exposing the truth on environmentally-damaging projects. Digital surveillance was listed as a key concern for environmental groups going forward.

45. Participants raised the worrying interplay between public smear campaigns and judicial harassment faced by environmental human rights defenders across Europe. Through public relations offensives – such as websites dedicated to stigmatizing a particular group – the governments or companies concerned try to make their judicial, operational and verbal attacks on environmental campaigners more easily justifiable in the public eye. This is done by targeting specific individuals, organisations or journalists who are causing the most harm to an environmentally-degrading project, and by attempting to isolate them from the rest of civil society.
46. Many participants referred to lawsuits they were themselves facing because of peaceful environmental campaigning they took part in. Participants listed examples from their countries, or from their very own organisations, of activists being under investigation, arrested, prosecuted criminally, forced to flee in exile, all simply for speaking out against environmental degradation. Participation in protests is often equated with a criminal offense, and collective liability is sometimes applied when it is less clear which individuals perpetrated an alleged infraction.
47. But while one can try to defend oneself against criminal charges in court, several participants warned of the worrying trend of surveillance measures adopted by law enforcement towards environmental activists, which are harder to detect and challenge legally before they occur.
48. Aggressive tactics towards environmental defenders extends to media as well, due to their indispensable role in helping activists spread their messages and expose truths. Participants mentioned several examples, from an oil company lawsuit against a newspaper, to testimonies of threats against journalists who were interested in covering an environmental campaign, leading in many cases to abrupt cancellations.

Restrictive frameworks

49. A range of new laws passed across Europe were of serious concern to participants, who said that their ability to operate was constantly challenged by an increasingly restrictive framework. Foreign agent laws, mentioned earlier in the report, are used extensively to restrict the scope of action of environmental NGOs, through recurring fines and prosecution of its members.
50. Recently proposed or passed laws which limit civil society's ability to monitor law enforcement activity, or which broaden the definition of "terrorist activity" without safeguards, will also have direct effects on environmental defenders. Participants feared that the risk of facing jail time will dissuade more people from joining campaigns, thereby making environmental protection more difficult.
51. Together with the reprisals and other restrictive measures discussed earlier in the report, these laws and related prosecutions create a chilling effect on the whole of society: in some countries, even commercial suppliers of environmental organisations were reportedly contacted by the police and intimidated.

Responses

52. In responding to attacks on activists or journalists covering environmental campaigns, participants stressed the importance for partners and institutions to speak out and characterize the actions as nothing other than attacks on human rights and democracy. Using social media to expose the attacks was also described as useful. As a deterrent against attacks, as well as to limit the likelihood of impunity should attacks take place, some participants cited the use of body and dashboard cameras as helpful.

53. With regards to legal initiatives targeting activists, participants noted existing judgments by courts in Europe considering activists' actions as necessary and proportionate given the seriousness of certain environmental issues. In one case, an activist's first-degree conviction was overturned on appeal because the gesture of protest was labeled as self-defense, given the targeted private company's role in contributing to climate change. Further, the judge ruled that young people have no other way but civil disobedience to make things better.
54. Participants raised the potential development of a rapid response mechanism within the context of the Aarhus Convention, to deal with cases of harassment and threats, as a promising avenue to be further explored and supported.
55. The social and mental repercussions of facing the kinds of reprisals described earlier in the report were also highlighted: loneliness, the straining of relationships, and, for many, the choice to disengage. For this reason, social-psychological help and rehabilitation for defenders facing repression is an important element.

3 THE WAY FORWARD

56. The last session of the roundtable provided an opportunity for participants to discuss areas and themes where the Commissioner's voice, as well as the attention of other international institutions, would be most beneficial.
57. Participants generally stressed the importance for the Commissioner, as well as organisations like the Council of Europe more broadly, to speak publicly when environmental human rights defenders face reprisals or undue restrictions. They encouraged the Commissioner to continue using her dialogue with governments in member States to raise concerns, as this can prove very helpful locally. Public statements on harmful foreign agent – or similar – laws were highlighted in particular, and participants encouraged the Commissioner to continue [her focus](#) on this matter, as well as on strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and legal intimidation in general, building on her recently released [Human Rights Comment](#) entitled "Time to take action against SLAPPs".
58. Many participants also highlighted how visits by the Commissioner to their specific areas of operation would be very helpful to bring attention to their environmental causes and to help hold governments or other powerful actors accountable.
59. The importance of continuing to support the implementation of the Aarhus Convention was a consistent theme throughout the roundtable: in many signatory states, transparency, access to information, participation in decision-making, and access to justice regarding environmental issues still lags. A specific suggestion in this respect was to ensure that individuals or groups seeking justice have access to expert opinions without rendering the proceedings prohibitively expensive, as required by the Convention. Connected to this, the special status of NGOs in representing the interests of individuals affected by environmental degradation, as recognised in the Aarhus Convention, should be applied by all state parties and recognized by international organisations and courts as well.
60. The issue of civil liability for protesters was raised as an area that should be further explored, as powerful actors seeking damages from peaceful protests is a problematic trend throughout Europe. It was argued that following some existing judgments, such as one in the Netherlands

involving Shell,⁸ the legal notion that companies have to accept some level of disruption due to peaceful protests should be accepted as a standard throughout Europe.

61. Another area which may require further attention is on the cooperation between environmental human rights defenders and national human rights institutions. Not many participants described having worked with their respective human rights bodies, but the [recent focus on climate change](#) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions could signal more sustained support and interaction in the near future.
62. Other suggestions by participants included looking into the rights of nature as a way to lend more gravitas to their campaigns, and putting the spotlight on the indirect climate emissions of Council of Europe member States, including, for example, the export of fossil fuels or the financing of polluting projects abroad. More research and mapping on the disproportionate impact on minorities and vulnerable groups of environmental degradation is necessary, so as to not allow climate change and other factors to reinforce inequalities. Updating relevant capacity building materials with the connection between environment and human rights, as is underway with the European Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP), would meet a large demand for trainings on this issue.
63. Referring to the success stories outlined by participants during the round-table, the Commissioner said it was important for the successful implementation of her mandate to be able to demonstrate that there are concrete possibilities to sustain human rights, even when faced with considerable odds. To this end, the examples shared regarding working with local stakeholders, building coalitions, and complementing different campaign approaches, were extremely important both for the benefit of other participants and for human rights defenders across Europe. Observing how the various dynamics presently at play on environmental rights made it a good time to have this discussion, the Commissioner thanked the participants and urged them to stay in touch with the Office so as to develop concrete ways to join forces in defending environmental rights going forward.

⁸ <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/dutch-court-grants-greenpeace-right-to-stage-peaceful-protests-against-shell/>