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High-level conference
“ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS”
organised under the aegis of the Georgian Presidency
of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Speech by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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I would start by thanking Georgia for making Environment and Human Rights the priority of its Presidency and raising the profile of the theme of Environment and Human Rights within the Council of Europe and among its member States.

The event could not be more timely.

I don't think that any of us here would deny that living in a degraded, unhealthy environment can violate our human rights in many ways. The rights that come to mind include the right to life, health, food, water, private life, or the peaceful enjoyment of the home.

But human rights are not just the victim of environmental degradation; they are also the key to rolling it back.

It would be futile to try to protect the environment without at the same time protecting human rights such as the freedoms of expression, association or assembly, the right to an effective remedy, or the right to education – to name just a few of the so-called 'enabling' rights.

I am happy to see that the awareness of the extent to which these two aspects are intertwined is rapidly growing – and I cannot stress enough the importance of recognising this link.

I would like to highlight here the precious work carried out by the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur, including the Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment, to clarify the nature of this link and shed more light on its various aspects.

My office has also already contributed some work in this field in the past: taking action to protect disadvantaged communities' right to a healthy environment in some member states; or intervening before the European Court of Human Rights. Last year I issued [Human rights Comment](#) “Living in a clean environment: a neglected human rights concern for all of us”, where, among other issues, I addressed the issue of environmental degradation and human suffering and concluded that our efforts to protect human rights should go hand in hand with protecting the environment.

My team and I have already started raising the profile of this important thematic file and reflecting on what my priorities could be and the further actions I could take.

Environmental human rights defenders and journalists are one such clear priority.

In many places around the world, including in Europe, they are attacked, persecuted and silenced. Often, they are collectively branded as ‘extremists’ and targeted by counter-extremism legislation and policy, or by smear campaigns.

Their freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are unduly curtailed, as I have noted in a recent human rights comment, for instance around climate change conferences.

Most often, however – and this is especially true of many young activists – environmental human rights defenders are played down, derided, or simply ignored in an attempt to prevent their important calls from reaching our ears.

This must change.

To help change that, I intend to meet with European environmental human rights defenders later this year – to hear about their problems and see together how I can use my mandate and my voice to shield them from harm and help them in their work.

I would also like to raise public awareness of the important work done in defining and interpreting standards on environment and human rights by the various Council of Europe bodies represented here today – and to take under closer scrutiny how member States translate these standards into laws, policies and measures, at the central and local levels.

At the same time, I want to pay keen attention to how public authorities mitigate the negative consequences that the transition may have for the rights of those affected, so that the transition to a more sustainable future does not contribute to **rising social inequalities and poverty**.

Key partners for me here will be the **national human rights institutions**. They should have the right and the capacity to mainstream the rights-based approach to environmental protection.

Lastly, I would like to say a word of caution not to disregard the consequences of the pollution produced on our continent for the human rights of people living elsewhere. Much of the waste produced by some of our member states is shipped off to others. This is often done with little oversight of the consequences for the inhabitants of those countries, many of whom live in poverty.

We Europeans often take pride at “exporting” our human rights standards to other parts of the world. I think that the human rights-based approach should also apply to all other things that we export.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude with these **three messages**:

The *first one* is about procedural environmental rights.

To me, rights such as access to information and decision-making are the primary tools that empower citizens and defenders to protect the environment we live in

I regret that there are still six (6) Council of Europe member states that have not yet ratified the **Aarhus Convention**.¹

¹ UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, <https://www.unece.org/env/pp/treatytext.html>

Ratifying this key instrument is really the **absolute minimum**. I call on all member states that have not yet done so to ratify it promptly.

Second,

I encourage all Council of Europe member states to show their vocal support for the **explicit recognition, at the United Nations level, of the right to a healthy environment**.

Most of our member states have already recognised this right in their laws and constitutions. It would go a long way to helping global awareness and advocacy if they could also speak on this with one voice.

Third,

I would like you to think about **children** and young people

Because they are the ones who will bear the brunt of the damage if we fail to act.

But, as several members of the Parliamentary Assembly aptly stated, in a recent motion, “children are much more than passive victims of climate change – they are **powerful agents of change**”.

They want their voices to be heard and their rights to be respected.

Their calls for more ambitious action in reducing greenhouse gas emissions or fighting pollution are loud and clear.

They expect their governments to make this happen as soon as possible.

I sincerely hope that young Europeans who care about the environment and human rights may find in the Council of Europe an earnest and committed ally.