



Euro-Mediterranean Forum for Disaster Risk Governance, Health Preparedness, and Networking Advancement

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**Speaking points: Krzysztof Zyman,
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European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA)**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Council of Europe has worked since 1949 to protect human rights, and since 1967 to conserve natural heritage. The Council of Europe and its 46 member States are committed to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and contribute specifically through the lens of human rights, rule of law and democracy.

Setup in 1987, the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement is a European and Mediterranean platform for co-operation in the field of major natural and technological disasters between Europe and the South of the Mediterranean. It has long contributed to and continues to support the global efforts on Disaster Risk Reduction, specified in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

The link between environment and human rights is increasingly recognized today. A healthy environment is essential for the protection of human rights, while environmental degradation can lead to severe violations of these rights. Living in an unhealthy environment, marred by pollution, loss of biodiversity, impacted by ever-more frequent and impactful extreme weather events, which are amplified by human intervention or climate change, negatively impacts our well-being and fundamental rights. Ultimately, this degradation can undermine democracy itself.

The human rights-based approach to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, along with health protection, and the One Health approach are mutually reinforcing, even though they may sometimes appear to be in conflict. While the human rights-based approach traditionally considers environmental protection from an anthropocentric perspective, the One Health approach advocates for an integrated understanding of the interdependence between human health, animal health, and ecosystem health.

This difference in perspective underscores the importance of examining how these approaches can complement one another. Today, we had the opportunity to explore how human rights standards, principles, and monitoring mechanisms can support the objectives of the One Health approach. Today's event allows us to highlight ways in which a human rights-based framework can strengthen integrated and sustainable responses to complex health and environmental challenges.

The Council of Europe has emphasised that the coming years will be pivotal in shaping how Europe responds to the social, health, and environmental challenges of the future. It has reinforced its commitment to protecting social rights, improving health systems, and addressing environmental challenges through legal instruments, policy initiatives, and cross-sectoral collaboration.

At the 4th Council of Europe Summit held in Reykjavik in 2023, the Heads of State and Government reaffirmed the political recognition of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a fundamental human right. This reaffirmation included a commitment to strengthen efforts related to the human rights aspects of environmental protection.

With its long-standing expertise in environmental protection, public health, and animal welfare, the Council of Europe possesses the necessary tools, legal instruments and institutional structures to address the complex relationship between human rights, health (including animal health), and the environment.

There legal instruments date back almost 60 years, and they include:

- European Convention for the Protection of Animals during International Transport (1968) with an additional protocol of 1979, later replaced by the Revised European Convention for the Protection of Animals during International Transport (2003);
- European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes (1976);
- European Convention for the Protection of Animals for Slaughter (1979);
- European Convention for the Protection of Vertebrate Animals used for Experimental and other Scientific Purposes (1986), with an additional protocol of 1998;
- European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (1987).

In 2025, the Council of Europe adopted its Strategy on the Environment, reflecting its commitment to a forward-thinking, holistic vision that aligns human rights, democracy, and the rule of law with environmental protection. The Strategy

recognises that a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is essential for the full enjoyment of human rights for both present and future generations.

By integrating human rights into environmental policies, the Strategy lays the foundation for a future where ecological conservation and human well-being are mutually reinforcing. It promotes a holistic, rights-based, and ethical approach, as reflected in its integration of a One Health perspective. This approach seeks to balance and optimise the health of people, animals, and ecosystems in a sustainable manner.

The Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law was adopted on May 14, 2025, and opened for signature in Strasbourg on December 3, 2025. As a core pillar of the Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment, this Convention enables states to prevent, investigate, and sanction serious environmental offences, such as pollution, hazardous waste disposal, unlawful trade in illegally obtained timber, wildlife trafficking, mining abuses, and habitat destruction. The Convention covers criminal responsibility for actions that cause, or are likely to cause, death or serious injury to persons, or substantial damage to air, soil, water, animals, or plants.

Although the European Convention on Human Rights does not explicitly recognise a right to a clean and healthy environment, environment-related issues may be addressed under other provisions of the Convention, such as Article 2 (right to life) and Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life).

The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that states have positive obligations to establish effective legislative and administrative frameworks to protect human health and life, particularly through the regulation, supervision, and control of hazardous activities.

Two recent landmark judgments illustrate this approach:

Klimaseniorinnen v. Switzerland (April 2024): In this case, the Court found that Switzerland violated Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life) and Article 6.1 (access to a court). The Court accepted the argument that an NGO acting on behalf of older persons could claim to be subject to the adverse effects of climate change on

their life, health, well-being, and quality of life. The judgment demonstrates that climate change poses real threats to human rights under the ECHR. States must adopt timely, science-based mitigation policies with measurable targets, and associations can play a key role in defending human rights. Each state “must do its part.” The judgment marks a turning point in integrating climate obligations into the European human rights framework, balancing democratic governance with judicial oversight to protect present and future generations.

Cannavacciuolo and Others v. Italy: In this case, complainants argued that the widespread dumping, burying, and burning of waste in the Campania region, known as Terra dei Fuochi, posed a serious threat to public health. The European Court found that the Italian state's failure to effectively address these environmental issues violated the right to life. The Court's judgment highlighted the state's responsibility to act in a "precautionary" manner, especially given the long history of known pollution in the region. The Court ruled that the state could not rely on the uncertainty of the exact effects of the pollution on individuals' health to avoid its duty to protect the health and safety of its citizens.

The right to health protection is explicitly recognised in Article 11 of the European Social Charter (ESC). The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) has interpreted Article 11 to include the right to a healthy environment.

The EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement pays particular attention to the most vulnerable people because disasters affect them more than other groups and create or increase inequalities within our societies. For that reason, EUR-OPA adopted at its Ministerial Meeting in Portugal in 2021, held within the larger framework of the European Forum on Disaster Risk Reduction, two Recommendations: (i) *on Enabling and protecting persons with disabilities during public health emergencies resulting from pandemics* and (ii) *on Inclusion of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in public health emergencies resulting from pandemics*.

As a regional intergovernmental Agreement, the EUR-OPA Secretariat will continue to promote international cooperation in disaster risk reduction and the fulfilment of the mission of the European Center for Disaster Medicine over the coming months.