

# Peoples Rights and Defenders of Territories



Friends of  
the Earth  
International

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Friends of the Earth International analysis

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**Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) is committed to system change, and to building environmental, social, economic and gender justice.**

The world has witnessed a resurgence of conservative ideology that has taken on a particularly authoritarian character, rejecting traditional forms of politics, media and knowledge itself. Right-wing regimes are fostering political instability and actively eroding democratic principles. As the neoliberal capitalist system expands, stripping back regulations, privatising all aspects of our lives and 'shrinking' the state, repressive governments are imposing themselves with ever greater force.



## **Dismantling the architecture of impunity**

Transnational corporations continue to extract and exploit natural resources in the name of profit. The expansion of a neoliberal economic system is itself an underlying cause of the multiple crises we face – climate, biodiversity, food, water, and health crises, among others – which threaten ecological systems and livelihoods. Meanwhile, the current political context has led to a devastating escalation of political violence, with attacks on peoples’ rights and those who defend them.

Yet, in the face of crisis, people are organising to defend territories and rights, and questioning the very principles at the root of a system in dire need of transformative change to protect and improve life on Earth. This moment of crisis opens the door for that system change.

Both organised resistance and social/public awareness of the expansion of corporate power are on the rise. We see this with the massive demonstrations around the world against free trade agreements and fossil fuel extraction, and the ongoing negotiations for an International Binding Treaty that would hold

corporations legally responsible for human rights violations.

The response of corporate and capitalist interests to collective resistance has been to fight back against communities: powerful state and non-state actors attempt to overthrow leftist governments around the world, civil space becomes more restrictive, new kinds of markets are opened promoting financialisation of nature and green capitalism, and nature is turned into financial assets for trading. Some of the greatest threats created by the current system are faced by those who defend the places they have constructed collectively and historically.

These marginalised communities are stigmatised, attacked, imprisoned, tortured and killed, all of which are flagrant violations of their human rights that go beyond the context of social and environmental conflicts and are part of a broader network of transgressed rights. These include the violation of peoples’ rights – to land, food, water and to exercise traditional and ancestral practices, as well as the functioning of their own judiciary systems, etc.

## **What we mean by People Rights**

Given the particular circumstances of working to ensure environmental justice globally, FoEI considers it necessary to engage in the international debate to define what is understood as human rights. Individual human rights do not guarantee adequate protection for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, peasants, and other peoples under attack. These political subjects face particular threats to their livelihoods, environments, health and security, and their very survival depend upon the recognition and protection of their collective rights.

We believe it is paramount to rethink the category of human rights and

human rights defenders, in order to apply this category to collective struggles in defence of the commons and territories.

When a corporation wants to pursue a destructive “development project”, a whole territory is under attack, and an entire community stands up to defend the territory.

Human rights concepts must take into account existing contradictions and forces within and among societies that render the violations of peoples’ rights invisible, such as class conflict, patriarchy, sexism, racism, social discrimination and exclusion, and neocolonialism.

## **Peoples Rights**

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We value the recent advancements in the international recognition of individual human rights and peoples rights. However, despite progress in creating legal frameworks to address rights, violations continue and are even increasing due to the current global model of production and consumption that is imposed by neoliberal economic globalisation.

Our work to address human rights violations needs to incorporate the rights of peoples, including the right to land, food, water, a clean and healthy environment, a sustainable model, the right to self-determination, and to preserve ancestral and traditional practices and forms of accountability and justice.

## What do we understand by “territory”?

The concept of “territory” refers to any space that is socially constructed. Social construction of territory occurs through the dynamic spiritual, cultural, physical and social relationships which humans have with and within a certain space.

The social construction of land includes how it is managed, who controls common goods and access to those goods, and how labour is divided. Many Indigenous Peoples and local communities hold traditional and ancestral relationships with land.

The body is also a territory and can be a space of resistance. For example, in opposition to exploitation through labour, sexual exploitation, and commodification.

Given this context, FoEI struggles for transformational system change and rejects the current patriarchal

political-economic system that bases its means of production and consumption on water and land-grabbing for agro-fuel plantations, mining projects, hydroelectric power generation, etc. We reject and stand against a system that attacks spaces of urban coexistence, that privatises spaces, public services and policy in order to define urban and rural space in its own image.

Defending the lives of women and men who represent the struggles of their communities is a necessary precondition for achieving system change. FoEI defends those spaces wherein resistance is developed as anti-hegemonic, anti-system spaces which form the basis for the construction of sustainable societies. As we work alongside grassroots communities in different countries and for the construction of peoples’ sovereignty, Friends of the Earth International fights for the defence of peoples rights and of the defenders of territories.

**Additional Resources:** Friends of the Earth International  
International solidarity with peoples and communities / Internationalist Solidarity  
→ [www.foei.org/internationalist-solidarity](http://www.foei.org/internationalist-solidarity)