



GOMUN 2025 OFFICIAL DOCUMENT

Study Guide

The Human Rights Council

Diana Ides, Alex Kryhut

Released October 2025, 1st Edition

COMMITTEE INTRODUCTION

The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental body within the United Nations system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations and making recommendations on them. It has the ability to discuss all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year. It meets at the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG).

First topic: Corporate Dominance vs. Human Rights: How power protects profits over people

Alex Kryhut

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Corporations are among the most powerful actors in the global system, shaping economies, politics, and even social structures. Their influence is not small and it impacts labor conditions, environmental policies, and the distribution of resources. Even though corporations do drive innovation and development, they are also criticised for prioritizing profit over human rights. Such as environmental degradation and exploitative labor. Corporate dominance frequently puts communities at risk and reinforces global inequities.

International human rights frameworks, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business seek to establish accountability mechanisms so that businesses respect fundamental rights. However implementations often fall because of corporate lobbying and weak governance. This imbalance of power leaves individuals and communities vulnerable to exploitation and overall harm

To protect human rights it is not only important to address isolated cases of abuse but also about enforcing dignity, equality and justice. The Human Rights Council should show that corporate power is incompatible with the recognition of human rights.

KEY TERMS

Human Rights Council (HRC) - United Nations body that promotes and protects human rights.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) - a historic document which outlined the rights and freedoms everyone is entitled to

UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) - global standard for preventing and addressing the risk of negative human rights impacts from business activities

OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises - government backed recommendations for responsible business conduct. It aims to ensure that multinational enterprises contribute positively to sustainable development

Corporate power - the significant economic and political influence large corporations have

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) - a business approach that helps with sustainable development by giving economic and environmental benefits for stakeholders

Stakeholders - any individual who may be affected by any company's activities

Corporate Accountability - a demand that wants companies to take legal and moral responsibility for the consequences of their actions on people or the environment

Remedy - mechanisms used to address potential or actual harm to human rights

Human Rights Due Diligence - an ongoing management process that a reasonable and cautious enterprise needs to undertake. Businesses can use it to identify and account for how they address their potential human rights impacts.

TOPIC OVERVIEW

Historical Background

Modern human rights law was formed after the Second World War with the creation of the UN and the UDHR in 1948. At that time the focus was more on states rather than corporations. Governments were expected to be the ones protecting rights while the companies were seen as the source of economic growth. Therefore corporations operated outside this human rights framework.

By the 1970s and 1980s, things began to change. Corporations had become more and more influential in global trade and investment. Their actions did bring economic growth and jobs however they also raised some concerns about labor standards. To address this issue the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises were introduced in the year 1976. They worked as

voluntary standards encouraging responsible corporate behavior.

The 1990s brought even bigger attention to corporate responsibility. Scandals involving oil companies in Nigeria and clothing brands relying on sweatshops in Asia showed just how corporate profit can come at the expense of human rights. During this period the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility CSR grew quite popular. Some companies promised to adopt sustainable policies. However, few critics believed that the concept of CSR was more about public relations than genuine change.

A kind of a turning point came in 2011, when the UN approved the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). This framework recognizes that corporations have a responsibility to respect human rights. The UNGPs also introduced the idea of human rights due diligence, which requires companies to address risks their actions pose. The UNGPs are not legally binding.

Current Situation

In the past decade the regulations on corporate power and human rights became binding. One of the most significant steps has been in Europe, where the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, adopted in 2024, will gradually require larger companies to address their human rights and environmental risks. Similar suggestions are being discussed in countries such as South Korea and Canada.

Courts also remain important in this topic. A recent case in the US ordered Chiquita Brands to pay damages to Colombian Families harmed by paramilitary groups. In Brazil authorities found almost slavery conditions for workers employed by Chinese firm BYD. Also in Europe, companies face climate related lawsuits. These examples show that concerns for human rights also go beyond labor rights but also to environmental protection and also climate change.

Regardless of these steps forward, challenges still remain. Victims in less

regulated regions still struggle to get remedies. And at the same time corporations are still influencing policies through lobbying. In the current moment governments are beginning to establish real obligations and courts are more and more willing to hear claims. Yet corporate power remains strong and the balance between protecting profits and protecting human rights is far from being done.

TIMELINE OF THE TOPIC

1948 - The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. The focus of the declaration is only on states and not on corporations.

1976 - OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are published. This is the first international framework for responsible business conduct, but it is just voluntary.

1990s - 2000s - Corporate controversies lead to lawsuits that test if companies can be held responsible for abuses abroad.

2011 - The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights were approved.

2010s - Courts in multiple countries begin hearing more cases against corporations such as the *Nevsun Resources v. Araya* case.

2020s - Shift from voluntary to mandatory regulations. This includes France and Germany adopting due diligence laws.

2024 - EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive is adopted. This requires larger companies to address human rights and environmental risks.

COUNTRY POSITIONS

United Nations (UN) - The UN plays an important role, because it provides the platform for debate and standard setting. The Human Rights Council created the UN Guiding Principles and recognized the right to a healthy environment.

United States (USA) - The USA supports voluntary frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles but opposes binding international rules that could limit corporate freedom. US companies are global leaders in tech and finance so they give the USA a major stake in shaping new global forms.

United Kingdom (UK) - The UK is a strong supporter of business and human rights debates in the UN and OECD. It was one of the first countries to adopt a National Action plan on Business and Human Rights. The UK is in favor of transparency laws.

France and Germany - France and Germany both play leading roles in Europe's efforts for mandatory corporate accountability. France passed the Duty of Vigilance Law which requires companies to monitor and prevent human rights abuses and Germany passed their Supply Chain Due Diligence Act that forces companies to address risks in their supply chains.

Sweden and Norway - They both advocate for strong human rights protections. Norway also funds international programs that support human rights programs supporting human rights defenders and plays an active role in pushing corporate responsibility debates forward.

Canada - Canada recognizes corporate responsibility. Especially in the mining industry, where many Canadian firms operate. The *Nevsun v. Araya* case confirmed corporate liability under international human rights law.

Mexico and Colombia - Both struggle with high levels of violence linked to corporate activity. The government introduced some reforms however the enforcement of those reforms are inconsistent. Same goes for Colombia.

China - China is expanding as a global corporate power. China strongly rejects external oversight and emphasizes state sovereignty.

QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION MUST ANSWER

What mechanisms will ensure workers and vulnerable communities can seek justice?

What is the responsibility of states to regulate corporations within their borders?

How can international bodies enforce accountability without violating national sovereignty?

What incentives or penalties can encourage ethical corporate behavior?

How will states report progress?

How can existing frameworks like the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises be strengthened or enforced?

SOURCES

- OHCHR. The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights: An Interpretive Guide. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1 June 2012, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2_En.pdf.
- OHCHR. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1 June 2012, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf.
- Reuters. “Chiquita Must Pay Colombian Families \$38.3 Million – Florida Jury.” Reuters, 10 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/chiquita-must-pay-colombian-families-383-mln-florida-jury-2024-06-10/>.
- The Guardian. “BYD Construction Site in Brazil Shut Over ‘Slavery-like’ Conditions.” The Guardian, 24 Dec. 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/dec/24/byd-car-factory-constru>

ction-site-brazil-shut-chinese-nationals.

- OECD. Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 16 June 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/sustainability-initiatives-in-due-diligence-regulation-and-policy_eafa3786-en.html.
- OECD. OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 8 June 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-guidelines-for-multinational-enterprises-on-responsible-business-conduct_81f92357-en.html.
- OHCHR. United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1 June 2012, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/reference-publications/guiding-principles-business-and-human-rights>.
- Supreme Court of Canada. SCC Case Information – Search. Supreme Court of Canada, 30 Sept. 2025, <https://www.scc-csc.ca/case-dossier/cn/2025/2025-01-01/>.
- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. Homepage. Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 30 Sept. 2025, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/>.

Second topic: Protecting the Rights of Environmental Activists

Diana Ides

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Environmental advocates are one of the most critical change agents credited with protecting the earth as they work to mobilize society with respect to climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of natural resources.

Environmental advocates frequently hold governments and corporations accountable for degrading the environment while demanding sustainability.

Environmental advocates' work often puts them in stark opposition to competing powerful interests and puts them at risk of harassment, stigmatization, and violence. International human rights frameworks, including the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Aarhus Convention, recognize the entitlements to freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and participation in environmental related decision-making, which must be promoted so that these voices are not silenced. Environmental advocates protection is fundamentally concerned with more than individual safety, but with the broader human right to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment which was formally recognized by the Human Rights Council in 2021.

Despite these mechanisms in place, environmental defenders remain under threat in several countries, especially in areas with weak governance and corruption, and strong reliance on extractive industries. There has been recognition from the UN, various NGOs and regional human rights institutions of the importance of protecting environmental defenders. The Human Rights Council is not only able to protect a vulnerable group of environmental defenders by extending this protection but also it shows it is effective and illustrates that protecting the environment is part of the protection of human rights.

KEY TERMS

Human Rights Council (HRC) - United Nations body that promotes and protects human rights.

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) - individuals and groups who work in order to protect and promote human rights related to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Right to a Healthy Environment - the universal right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being.

Freedom of Expression Assembly - fundamental human rights that are often connected to the rights to association, which allow individuals to share ideas, express opinions, gather peacefully, and organize common interests, including political and social causes.

Criminalization of Activism - both state and corporate-driven efforts to use legal and extralegal tactics to suppress activism and silence dissent.

Aarhus Convention - global, legally binding treaty that gives the public three key environmental rights: access to information about the environment, public participation in environmental decision making, and access to justice in environmental matters.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) - abusive or unjustified legal actions filed by powerful entities to harass, intimidate, and silence critics, journalists, and activists by burdening them with expensive legal defences.

Indigenous Rights - universal human rights that recognize and uphold the distinct rights of Indigenous peoples to land, culture, autonomy, self-determination, and political and economic development.

Corporate Accountability - the acknowledgement and assumption of responsibility for the consequences of a company's actions.

HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT

The global awareness of the environment and its issues grew in the late 20th century. This became the starting point for the fight that secured environmental campaigners. The first Earth Day and The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1970 and 1972 respectively broke the paradigm in the 1970s by attempting to link environmental issues to development and the overall human rights situation. As environmental movements gained traction, the campaigns started targeting key political and industrial figures in the Global South where primary resource extraction was sited. Prominent incidents like the assassination of the activist and rubber tapper Chico Mendes in Brazil in 1988 and the spike in violence allegations against indigenous leaders in the 1980s and 1990s brought to light the environmental activism risk. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the 1998 Aarhus Convention legislated on the principle that the members of the public can take part in decisions about the environment, setting the minimum standard for the protection of the rights of defenders of the environment.

As a result of these global accomplishments, the increasing violence and repression faced by environmental defenders has escalated globally during the 21st Century. There are alarming patterns that both Global Witness and other NGOs began to track indicating that hundreds of actors are murdered every year (with Latin America and Southeast Asia being among the worst for murders). There is always a conflict that takes place over land, timber, mining, agribusiness and infrastructure projects that have usually very powerful corporate and government interests as well. For the last several decades, there have been international institutions (including the HRC) that have recognised that environmental defenders need protection from aggressions like violent attacks or homicides. In 2021, the HRC made an unprecedented move and adopted a resolution that recognised the importance of the right to a clean, healthy, safe and sustainable environment. However, the difference between acknowledging and supporting is large and providing protection to environmental defenders is a long-standing systemic human rights issue.

CURRENT SITUATION

According to reports, hundreds of environmental activists are still threatened, detained, or even murdered every year, especially in places where large-scale mining, farming, and land clearing are happening. While there are similar trends in many parts of Africa and Southeast Asia, Latin America continues as the most lethal location for defenders. When activists oppose big business-led or government-backed projects or ventures, many activists – especially indigenous leadership or rural activists- face surveillance, threats, and displacement. Besides physical attack, laws that come to restrict protests and non-governmental organizations, and legal threats through SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), have become everyday tactics to silence environmental voices.

The Human Rights Council issued a major advancement when it recognized the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in 2021 - but translating that into actual protections on the ground is difficult. A few states have begun overall adopting national frameworks to protect HRDs, and regional treaties, such as the Escazú Agreement in Latin America, signed in 2018, seeks to guarantee the right to environmental defenders to access to information and justice. However, enforcement and accountability for violence against HRDs is low. All of this today raises a significant tension: there is greater need than ever for strong environmental advocates and defenders due to the climate crisis, but these people are also among the most at-risk human rights defenders in the world.

KEY PLAYERS

United Nations (UN) - The UN has an important role through the Human Rights Council (HRC), which recognized the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in 2021. The HRC Special Rapporteurs, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment monitor threats against environmental activists and make recommendations to states. The UN provides the platform for international debate and standard-setting on the issue of environmental activism.

European Union (EU) - The EU has taken a lead in advocating for the protection of the environment and human rights. It encourages corporations to establish accountability measures, provides support to environmental defenders when operating in other countries, and funds initiatives to build strong civil society groups. The EU states often advocate for stronger multilateral frameworks to protect environmental activists.

Brazil - Brazil is important to the debate as it has a large area of the Amazon rainforest. Defending the rainforest against logging, agribusiness, and mining interests poses serious threats to environmental defenders and has made Brazil one of the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental defenders. As one of the biggest players in climate policy, Brazil's interventions weigh heavily on international and regional debates.

Philippines - The Philippines is always one of the most dangerous countries for environmental activists. Environmental defenders working on anti-mining, anti-energy and anti-agribusiness projects experience harassment, red-tagging and violence, which meet with consistent criticism from NGOs and UN agencies.

Mexico - Mexico is a place of widespread violence against defenders, especially indigenous activists. While it signed the Escazú Agreement, which mandates the protection of defenders and recognizes threats against them, uptake has been low and impunity for the attacks is of great concern.

Honduras - The 2016 killing of activist Berta Cáceres put Honduras on the international radar. Despite the attention, it remains one of the most dangerous places for defenders, with weak governance structures and high impunity rates, and presents a key case.

China - China has adopted some policies related to environmental protection and expanded the renewable energy sector, but the country restricts civil society movement very tightly. Independent environmental activism is subject to heavy censorship, and independent defenders suffer harassment or detention. China is robustly resistant to stronger international oversight on this issue.

Norway - Norway is a vocal supporter of environmental defenders and funds protection programs around the world. Norway is also an outspoken champion of indigenous rights and supplier chain corporate accountability in Norway. Norway often takes a leadership role in ongoing international conversations.

Costa Rica - As a regional leader in human rights and environmental protection, Costa Rica was one of the first countries to ratify the Escazú Agreement. It actively promotes cooperation among the region to protect defenders.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – Organizations like Global Witness, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Greenpeace play an important role in documenting attacks, demanding accountability and providing global attention to local struggles.

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities – Indigenous peoples are largely impacted by environmental conflict, especially as so many of them live in resource-rich localities; they also tend to be the most effective defenders of land, water, and forests, but are under extraordinary violence.

SOURCES

- United Nations Development Programme. Safeguarding the Rights and Lives of Environmental Activists. 2 Nov. 2022, <https://www.undp.org/speeches/protecting-environmental-human-rights-defenders-and-promoting-meaningful-participation-climate-talks>.
- United Nations Development Programme. Urgent Need to Protect Young Climate Activists | UNDP Climate Promise. 13 June 2022, <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/urgent-need-protect-young-climate-activists>.
- Human Rights Campaign Foundation. About the HRC Foundation. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/foundation-overview>.
- United Nations Development Programme. Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs). <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/environmental-human-rights-defenders>.
- International Service for Human Rights. Freedom of Expression, Association and Assembly in Focus. <https://ishr.ch/our-priorities/topics/freedom-of-expression-association-and-assembly>.
- Greenpeace International. A Brief History of Environmentalism. 5 Jan. 2018, <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/11658/a-brief-history-of-environmentalism>.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. Environmentalism: Conservation, Activism, Sustainability. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism>.
- Environmental Investigation Agency. Reports. <https://eia-international.org/reports>.
- Council of Europe. Protecting the Environmental & Climate Defenders in Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/protecting-environmental-climate-defenders-in-europe/1680a3b6f2>.
- Escazú Agreement. Protecting Environmental Defenders in Latin America. <https://www.escazufinalagreement.org>.
- Green Criminology. Green Criminology and Native Peoples: The Treadmill of Production. <https://greencriminology.org>.

This is the end of this document