

Protecting Human Rights and the Environment in Africa

A Human Rights Watch project

In a time when climate change is advancing and the effects of environmental degradation are felt especially by vulnerable populations, such as women and indigenous peoples, linking human rights to climate change has become an important task. Many organizations and governments, however, have treated human rights and environmental degradation as unrelated subjects up until today.

Credit Suisse participates actively in discussions on how to promote a more sustainable, climate-friendly approach to business. We exchange knowledge with a variety of organizations and seek to engage with expert groups such as Human Rights Watch (HRW). In an effort to defend human rights in the face of growing environment-related abuses in Africa, HRW conducted rigorous research into the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation and pollution on poor and marginalized communities. To counter abuses against these individuals, the organization built local and global advocacy pressure on governments, companies, aid donors, and other powerful actors to protect human rights in their environmental policies. In all of the work, HRW partnered closely with local environmental civil society actors to achieve meaningful human rights improvements.

Making Rights Central to Climate Change Strategies

In October 2015, HRW released its first [report](#) on the human rights impacts of climate change, focused on local indigenous populations surrounding the world's largest desert lake, Lake Turkana in Kenya. The region has been facing the effects of climate change including increasing average temperatures and shifting patterns of rain, which pose grave obstacles to the livelihoods of surrounding population of indigenous Turkana, especially fishermen, and nomadic pastoralists. HRW worked with nongovernmental organization (NGO) Friends of Lake Turkana to document the disproportionate impact of climate change on women, indigenous populations, the elderly, and people with disabilities. The research shows that climate change in Turkana, combined with existing political, environmental, and economic development challenges, has negatively impacted the Turkana people's ability to access food, water, health, and security. Pastoralists told Human Rights Watch that prolonged and more frequent droughts have dried out many water sources in the area, making every day a struggle of survival for people and their livestock. Women and girls are forced to walk extremely long distances to dig for water in dry riverbeds. Many children have become sick because their families are unable to provide them with sufficient food and clean water.

HRW's report and accompanying [multimedia](#) launch in Nairobi brought together a room filled with representatives from Kenyan civil society, journalists, international organizations, and government. In an immediate and positive reaction, authorities from Kenya's arid Turkana region welcomed HRW's research and recommendations for their county development planning. The HRW report was widely praised by Kenyan and international NGOs, Kenyan government officials, and UN actors as a model of how to examine and expose the impacts of climate change and human rights on marginalized communities. Domestically, HRW continues to urge the Kenyan government to ensure the rights to food, security, water, health, and non-discrimination are upheld in both its national climate change adaptation strategy and Turkana County development plans.

Protecting Communities From The Harmful Impacts Of Toxic Pollution

HRW further worked on a series of projects to address toxic pollution and to protect communities from its harmful impacts. Increasing toxic pollution from industrialization is causing vulnerable populations to suffer a range of pressures, including toxic air, denied access to water, and deadly diseases such as child lead poisoning. As industrialization has increased, governments have not been doing enough to mitigate these harmful effects. HRW has documented how people in urban slums

and remote mining regions alike suffer from local pollution. The organization's advocacy has brought local and global attention to the issue in Africa and beyond. In Kenya, for example, HRW's 2014 [video](#) on toxic lead pollution from a battery recycling plant outside Mombasa led officials to launch an investigation. Furthermore, HRW started a new research project in summer 2015 to investigate the health and environmental impacts of mining for non-renewable energy sources in Malawi. With the findings of the research HRW will advocate for human rights standards to be included and implemented in the government's new legal framework on extractive industries.

Incorporating Human Rights into a Global Climate Change Agreement

The HRW report on Turkana was crucial in advocacy with other governments and aid donors in the lead-up to the global climate change summit held in Paris in December 2015 (COP21). At this summit, 195 countries and the European Union met to reach a global climate change agreement. Working with a strong coalition of civil society groups, HRW used the Kenya findings to inform preliminary rounds of climate change negotiations, brief delegates from governments as well as environmental activists, and urge them to incorporate human rights into the future climate agreement. HRW's main goal was to ensure that the agreement included a recognition that protecting human rights is critical to a successful response to climate change, and that transparency and accountability mechanisms are incorporated in reviewing mitigation and adaption efforts. At the end of the summit, these efforts proved successful: the agreement includes language calling on states to respect and promote human rights in their response. Specially, in its preamble, the new climate agreement acknowledges "that climate change is a common concern of humankind" and that parties should "respect, promote and consider" human rights including the right to health and the rights of indigenous peoples, as well as "migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations." It is the first time in history that human rights language is included in a global agreement on climate change. The inclusion of human rights in the agreement gives HRW a key tool to engage with governments to conserve the environment, and thereby to protect people.