

IFEX Submission

Promoting Environmental Democracy: Countering Attacks on Access to Information and Reinforcing Civic Space

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[IFEX](#) is a global network promoting and defending freedom of expression and information as a fundamental human right. It is a nexus for free expression expertise contributed by 119 member-organisations, spanning 74 countries and committed to collaboration and transformative advocacy. We are pleased to present this submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment to inform the report on the implementation of the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, to be presented at the 55th session of the Human Rights Council.

Introduction

The urgency of the climate crisis is colliding with a shrinking civic space in which freedom of expression and access to information are under severe threat. Drawing on the expertise of IFEX's global network of member organisations, this submission focuses on how States and companies are not only failing to live up to their obligations and responsibilities by obstructing environmental reporting and targeting environmental defenders, they are actively contributing to a vacuum of critical information for understanding and addressing the climate crisis.¹ While international guidance and conventions on access to information and the environment have led to stronger frameworks for protecting both, these are only as good as the efforts to action them. States and companies must be held accountable for their responsibilities in this regard. Meanwhile, civil society has been stepping up, defending people's right to information and documenting and reporting on abuses of that right, while emphasising the need for a robust civic space to promote environmental democracy and a safe, healthy, and sustainable global ecological environment.

The legal and normative context for access to environmental information

Over the years, access to information has gained recognition and attention as its own fundamental human right, both at the intergovernmental level and by States that have taken steps to enact [legislation on access to information](#). It is also embedded in various international and regional environmental treaties, mechanisms, and documents which include access to information as an enabling right and [part of the body of environmental rights](#), and has explicitly been [referenced](#) in UN Resolution [A/RES/76/300](#) as "vital to the protection of a clean, healthy and sustainable environment".

[Principle 10](#) of the [Rio Declaration](#) states, "[a]t the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities". This is enshrined in the [Aarhus Convention](#) which imposes legally binding obligations on States to ensure public access to environmental information and the responsibility to collect and disseminate information under Articles 4 and 5, respectively. These articles are echoed throughout several [multilateral environmental agreements](#) and [frameworks](#) calling for States to make environmental information - such as data and reports related to biodiversity, water safety, air

¹ "Environmental defenders" includes defenders, activists, and others working to combat environmental destruction and advocate for the protection and realisation of environmental and human rights.



quality, disaster risk, and more - accessible to the public. They are reinforced through regional frameworks, such as the [Escazú Agreement](#) and [Tromsø Convention](#), and non-State frameworks such as the [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#). Businesses are expected to respect human rights independently of States and be attentive to adverse human rights impacts, including the disproportionate risks to marginalised and vulnerable groups. Resolution [A/HRC/RES/50/15](#) explicitly acknowledges the important role of business enterprises, including tech companies and social media platforms, in enabling access to information.

Despite this framework, State and corporate political and economic interests have taken precedence. This has enabled the escalation of environmental rights abuses and amplified existing State-sponsored violations of the rights to free expression, public participation, free assembly, and association, while systematically eroding civic space. Impeding the full realisation of access to information is hindering efforts to build and defend a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Obstructing environmental reporting

The growing urgency of the climate crisis has been accompanied by an increase in [hostility against journalists](#) reporting on the environment. In Europe, [criminalisation](#) in the form of [arbitrary detention](#), prosecution² and other heavy-handed treatment by law enforcement, as well as instances of more generalised [violence](#) against journalists covering climate protests and environmental issues, have been [identified](#) as “a new development”. IFEX member the [European Federation of Journalists](#) reported that journalists covering climate protests in Spain and the UK [faced fines, prosecution and imprisonment](#). Across the Asia-Pacific region, journalists have [struggled](#) with restrictive legislation, online harassment and defamation suits, and access to environmental data. Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa has made environmental reporting [near-impossible](#), with high levels of repression, harassment and intimidation.

These hostile conditions impede environmental coverage, undermining people’s understanding and ability to adapt to climate change and its destructive impacts. Without the actions taken by civil society organisations (CSOs), these aggressive efforts would, in most cases, be successful. In 2022, [Voice of Democracy](#) (VOD) – run by IFEX member the [Cambodian Center for Independent Media](#) (CCIM) – reported on the [government-sanctioned rapid deforestation](#) of the Phnom Tamao forest. Public outrage on social media initially forced authorities to reverse course, but during their follow-up, the outlet’s journalists were prohibited from documenting ongoing evidence, arbitrarily detained, and subjected to violence. In February 2023, VOD’s media licence was [revoked](#) as part of the government’s [ongoing and systematic attack](#) on independent media.³

VOD’s shutdown has contributed to an alarming loss that is interfering with the public’s right to information, participation, and free assembly, and enabling a lack of government accountability. In response, CCIM launched a public database: [Kamnotra](#) [*The Record*], to counter the government’s lack of transparency by consolidating and contextualising public data. It is being used by journalists, researchers, civil society, and others to [track](#) land conflicts with potential environmental implications.

Given the risks associated with reporting on the environment, it is worth noting relevant normative frameworks developed with input and advocacy by IFEX members to guide State behaviour with regards to ensuring a safe and enabling context for journalistic work. For example, Resolution [A/HRC/RES/51/9](#) calls for States to account for the role and vulnerability of journalists covering protests, the need to protect them, and to ensure accountability and access to remedy. Mechanisms such as the [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#) provide a roadmap for multi-stakeholder cooperation, and recently, an avenue for civil society to issue

² In 2022, eight journalists were prosecuted in this context in [France](#), [Spain](#), [Sweden](#), and the [United Kingdom](#).

³ On 28 September 2023, VOD announced it would [resume](#) operations in exile in October 2023.

[recommendations](#) to strengthen support for monitoring attacks, establishing national safety mechanisms, and other measures. Implementation of recommendations and normative standards related to the safety of journalists is crucial for upholding commitments pertaining to environmental rights.

Attempts to silence environmental defenders

Environmental defenders face [acutely heightened](#) threats. In 2022, Global Witness recorded at least [1,700+ environmental and land defenders](#) killed with impunity in the past ten years – likely a vast underestimate. And, as IFEX member [Free Press Unlimited](#) (FPU) has observed, despite often acting in an information-sharing or journalistic capacity, environmental defenders lack the national and legal protection frameworks and mechanisms that journalists can often draw on.

This makes them easy targets, particularly if they come from marginalised groups working in isolated areas. For example, [Indigenous activists and defenders](#) working in obscurity face [specific risks and dangers](#) while combating overfishing, illegal mining and logging, and other destructive activities. As attacks against them often go unreported, this not only contributes to the cycle of violence and impunity, it also hinders understanding of [discriminatory patterns](#) in violations which are critical for governments to address at the national and international level. Defenders from local or rural low-income communities, women, Indigenous people and people of African descent as well as those with other marginalised identities, all face varying levels of intersectional discrimination and have disproportionate experiences of the climate crisis.

The already dangerous context faced by environmental defenders has been exacerbated by entrenched economic interests of States and companies. A report by the Coalition for Human Rights in Development [highlights](#) how development banks rely on their clients to address reprisals, even though they are most often the perpetrators of them. Entrusting risk assessments, stakeholder engagement, and consultations to the companies and government authorities leading development projects can put defenders and communities at risk of being targeted, if not in the direct line of fire, when they speak out. This “send[s] a chilling message to the wider community, curtail[ing] the opportunities for participation and engagement...and...jeopardizing the success of the project itself.”

Indeed, any development projects with social and environmental impacts must be informed by the perspectives of potentially affected communities. An example of CSO efforts to promote this is the work of IFEX member [Africa Freedom of Information Centre](#) (AFIC) in Uganda. They [trained community members and civil society](#) in their rights to information about development projects. With AFIC’s support, community members filed freedom of information requests that successfully engaged government leaders and held them [accountable](#) for delivering on a long-awaited project to supply water to villages. Initiatives such as this build trust among local communities, civil society, and government to collaborate on solutions, and illustrate the value of access to information and community participation in sustainable development.

IFEX members have also supported environmental defenders in various ways. [Globe International Center](#) [advocated](#) for rights defenders who had been targeted for speaking out about damaging development projects in Mongolia; FPU [supported](#) justice efforts for activist Gerry Ortega, who was murdered following his coverage of illegal mining activities and corruption in Palawan; and [Abraji](#) developed an [Environmental Defenders project](#) to support rights of access to participation, information, justice, and protection for defenders working in the Brazilian Amazon. These efforts empower and improve the visibility of defenders, strengthen their voices and participation in public spaces, and promote respect for fundamental human rights and rule of law.



Misinformation, disinformation, missing information... and controlling the narrative

With access to accurate and reliable information stifled, misinformation and targeted disinformation have proliferated to fill the void, presenting new challenges. These include the polarisation of uninformed opinions among some, and disempowerment and disengagement from the issue altogether, among others. Again, CSOs are working to counter these negative impacts.

In Egypt, the proliferation of [false information](#) on the climate crisis and [intensified repression of civil society](#) interfered with the implementation of effective climate action during the COP27 conference. The situation was made worse through social media, with the [rapid rise](#) of #ClimateScam on Twitter and [content recommendations](#) by Facebook's algorithm devaluing the urgent threat of climate change.

During the [II Amazon Summit on Journalism and Climate Change](#), co-organised by IFEX member [Fundamedios](#), speakers highlighted the dangers of new climate scepticism narratives that shift responsibility for the climate crisis, buy into techno-optimism, and discredit media coverage as exaggerating the issues. These narratives distort public knowledge, undermine support for climate mitigation policies and hinder policymakers from progressive action. States also present their own narratives: criminalising and stigmatising environmental defenders as [‘terrorists’](#) and disguising State-sponsored violence as [green initiatives](#).

An example of CSOs pushing back against false narratives comes from [Visualizing Palestine](#) – an offshoot of IFEX member [Visualizing Impact](#) – which is using [visual campaigns](#) to illustrate Israel's 'greenwashing' of military occupation, extractive projects, tree-planting, and waste dumping, which violates Palestinians' rights and increases their vulnerability to climate change.

The [devaluing](#) of news around climate events is leading to reductions in coverage and circulation of important information. IFEX member [Media Matters for Democracy](#) noted that journalists' lack of [climate literacy](#) and their focus on 'situational' reporting led to a missed opportunity to explain the larger context of climate change around the devastating June-August 2022 flooding in Pakistan. This could have improved the public's ability to respond to the event and to hold the government accountable. Instead, media complacency and lack of amplification contributed to a slow government response and hindered the public's ability to find resources and support. This particularly affected [vulnerable communities](#) in rural and poverty-stricken areas, exacerbating discriminatory impacts. IFEX member [Digital Rights Foundation](#) observed a disproportionate impact of the flooding on pregnant women's access to food, healthcare, and safety.

To strengthen the positive role media can play, and to counter efforts to undermine their work, IFEX members [Abraji](#), [ADISI-Cameroun](#), and the [Media Foundation for West Africa](#), respectively, launched training programmes on environmental journalism in [Brazil](#), [Cameroon](#), and [West Africa](#) to empower journalists to more effectively engage with environmental issues and learn strategies for safer reporting.

Conclusion

As the climate crisis escalates, the information ecosystem needed to address it is under attack. Crackdowns on free expression and press freedom, blatant impunity for violence against environmental defenders, and the subversion of information integrity are all contributing to a vacuum in understanding and obstacles to engagement at a time when action is urgently needed to combat the effects of climate change.

In addition to ensuring compliance with international law, States must implement and enforce effective national laws and mechanisms to improve access to information and environmental protection. When journalists and environmental defenders are threatened, attacked or killed, States must hold the perpetrators accountable. They



must enforce private sector compliance with national environmental laws, ensure transparency in their activities, and guarantee respect for the rights to free expression, access to information, and free assembly.

Above all, civic space must be reinforced by strong protections for free expression and access to information to enable the procedural environmental rights that are necessary for States and companies to fulfil their obligations, responsibilities, and commitments towards a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment – and to be held accountable, when they do not.

