

*Check against delivery*

**45th session of the Human Rights Council**  
**Annual panel discussion on the rights of indigenous peoples**  
*Protection of indigenous human rights defenders*

**Address by Ms. Nada Al-Nashif**  
**United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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**Assembly Hall, Palais des Nations**

Madame President,  
Members of the Human Rights Council,

It is my pleasure to open this panel on the protection of indigenous human rights defenders: extraordinary people representing some of the most vulnerable communities in the world additionally endangered now in the context of a global pandemic.

In 2015, the international community adopted the Sustainable Development Goals – goals targeting social justice outcomes, anchored in human rights (i.e. economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights), promising to “leave no one behind”.

Indigenous peoples are specifically referred to in the 2030 Agenda in targets on hunger and education as well as participation, a reminder of the prominence of this right in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Other goals, such as those relating to land, have a particular importance for indigenous peoples. Agenda 2030 reflects what we already know: that indigenous peoples face specific challenges, experience marginalization and suffer from multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Furthermore, the global challenge of COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples, exposing these pre-existing structural inequalities. Indigenous peoples were already disadvantaged in terms of their health and access to quality health care prior to the pandemic. The crisis has only made this situation worse. Reports of increased conflict and encroachment over indigenous land in recent months point to yet further negative outcomes for indigenous people. The short and long-term social and economic consequences of COVID-19 are unlikely to improve their lives.

Indigenous human rights defenders support indigenous people's rights. They are agents of change, and guardians of their land, natural resources, culture, knowledge, livelihoods - in essence their identity, the basis for their continued existence as peoples. However, protecting their way of life has increasingly jeopardized these defenders' own lives. Reports of increased harassment, attacks, acts of violence and killings are worrying and reflect the impunity that often follows these crimes. In 2019, one NGO recorded murders of 212 land and environment defenders: the highest number since 2012.<sup>1</sup> Forty percent of such victims belonged to indigenous communities. Most likely these figures underrepresent the true extent of the problem.

We need to find ways to collect more data on the injurious treatment of indigenous human rights defenders – especially if we are to seriously assess the impact of policies and programmes aimed at improving indigenous peoples' well-being and combating discrimination against them.

Indigenous peoples are often the first casualties of aggressive development models that violate traditional lands and transgress on their natural resources. However, sustainable development approaches can respect indigenous rights, in particular the collective nature of their rights and respect for their free, prior and informed consent. The challenges faced often arise from a lack of understanding of the significance of land to indigenous peoples and their rights to that land. Land represents the defining element of indigenous identity and culture as well as their relationship to their ancestors and future generations.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous peoples right to land, founded on the right to self-determination, is noted in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples - a document of global standard, which has informed constitutions, statutes, regional and national laws the world over.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defending-tomorrow/>

<sup>2</sup> A/HRC/45/38

Madame President,

OHCHR supports numerous mechanisms that can directly and indirectly protect indigenous human rights defenders - and we have a wealth of reports, decisions, and resolutions, all based on international law, developed and ratified by Member States. It is indeed the responsibility of States to protect them, ensuring they can act without risk of intimidation, harassment or violence, especially when engaging with the United Nations.

Today, however, despite this body of evidence and standards, some States invest great effort to silence, punish - even criminalize - indigenous human rights defenders.<sup>3</sup> The UN cannot remain indifferent in such cases. In his Call to Action for Human Rights, the Secretary General calls for better protection of all human rights defenders through inclusive and meaningful participation, promotion of enabling environments and more effective protection.

We count on States, the primary players, to ensure the protection of indigenous human rights defenders and to hold aggressors and violators to account.

We are privileged today to have with us some fearless, dedicated indigenous human rights defenders and activists. I count on you to listen and to follow up to make sure we are truly “leaving no one behind”.

Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> [A/HRC/39/17](#), 2018