

Seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention
Item 8 (c) - Synergies between the Convention and other relevant multilateral environmental agreements and other partners

Statement by Mr. Benjamin Schachter, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the invitation to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to contribute to this session on synergies between the Aarhus Convention and other relevant multilateral environmental agreements and partners.

The Aarhus Convention, the Escazú Agreement and Rio Principle 10 specifically articulate the application of the rights to participation, access to information and access to justice in environmental matters. They also offer clear guidance for the protection of environmental human rights defenders.

In doing so, they give strong effect to corresponding State obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in the environmental context.

Aarhus Convention Article 1 describes its objective as “contribut[ing] to the protection of the right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being”.

This recognition of the right to a healthy environment in the Aarhus Convention served as an important stepping stone toward universal recognition of a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right by the 48th session of the Human Rights Council earlier this month in its resolution 48/13.

In this landmark resolution, the Council recognizes that “the exercise of human rights, including the rights to seek, receive and impart information, to participate effectively in the conduct of government and public affairs and in environmental decision-making and to an effective remedy, is vital to the protection of a clean, healthy and sustainable environment”.

The resolution further emphasizes the importance of respecting the rights to life, liberty and security of human rights defenders working in environmental matters.

Another Council resolution, 40/11 focuses specifically on environmental human rights defenders. It recognizes the need for their protection and the critical linkages between their work, the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development.

In this regard, OHCHR welcomes the effort to establish a new rapid response mechanism under the Aarhus Convention and encourages that mechanism to draw upon relevant guidance from the Council and its mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders who spoke at an earlier session of the COP/MOP 7 on this subject.

If we don't protect those who protect the environment and guarantee the rights of all persons to participation, access to information and access to justice in environmental matters, we have little hope of fulfilling the right to a healthy environment for present and future generations.

And this, in turn, jeopardizes the realization of all human rights to such an extent that the High Commissioner dedicated the majority of her last global update to the Council to the triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution and nature loss describing them as the greatest human rights challenge of our era.

Participation, access to information, accountability and enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment are also inextricably linked to the human right to benefit from science and its applications - the focus of the most recent report of the Special Rapporteur on toxics to the Council - and critical to work under the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Register.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recognition of the human right to a healthy environment by the Council during its 48th session along with its establishment of a new Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change sends a powerful signal that the international community has recognized the need to do more to bridge the gap between the efforts to protect the environment and those to protect human rights.

OHCHR is committed to respond with ambition. We are working within the UN system to advance implementation of the human right to a healthy environment and develop UN system guidance for the protection of environmental human rights defenders under the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights.

These efforts have yielded the Step Up! – Joint Commitment from heads of UN entities which promotes the right of children, youth and future generations to a healthy environment and their meaningful participation in decision-making as well as UN system-wide guidance on furthering PARTICIPATION of civil society, PROMOTING civic space, including online civic space and PROTECTING civil society actors.

We look forward to continuing to work with our partners at the Aarhus Convention to further these objectives.