

The UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention holds a closed-door workshop on civil disobedience in the context of environmental activism in Europe

On 19 July 2023, the United Nations [Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders](#) under the [Aarhus Convention](#), Michel Forst, held a closed-door workshop on civil disobedience in the context of environmental activism in Europe. It was organized in Paris, in cooperation with the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions ([ENNHRI](#)).

This event is part of a broader project conducted under the mandate of the Special Rapporteur, on the *Protection of environmental defenders and their freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association in Europe*, in the context of environmental activism and civil disobedience.

The workshop gathered 27 participants from 10 European countries¹ – environmental defenders, legal counsel, academics – as well as six national human rights institutions (NHRIs)², and aimed at:

- Identifying trends in authorities’ responses to civil disobedience regarding the environment in various European countries, by fostering cross-country discussions on the challenges environmental defenders and their legal counsel face before, during and after actions of peaceful civil disobedience, and that impede their exercise of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.
- Identifying ways, including for NHRIs, to strengthen the protection of environmental defenders and their rights to freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly and association, exercised in the form of peaceful civil disobedience.
- Developing guidance for national authorities on how to respond to peaceful civil disobedience, in line with the requirements of the international human rights framework.
- Supporting the establishment and strengthening of networks of environmental defenders and of their legal counsel, to share experiences and good practices and develop strategies at national and international level to enhance their protection.

“This workshop has showed me that, like most human rights defenders, environmental defenders who use peaceful civil disobedience in Europe are fighting an even broader fight than the one they seem to be fighting at first glance. They are not only defending a livable future on our planet, as if that wasn’t already a big enough challenge, they are also standing for the respect of our fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. They are alerting us about how the restrictions upon these rights are affecting us all as a society.

We should not have to have long debates on whether brutally arresting, arbitrarily detaining, prosecuting, or convicting peaceful protesters is a suitable State response to civil disobedience, or whether a fine or a prison sentence would be more appropriate to punish someone who climbed a bridge or interrupted a sporting event.

The only reasonable response to peaceful environmental civil disobedience at this point is that the authorities, the media and the public realize how essential it is for us all to hear what environmental activists have to say. How essential it is for our future to ensure that they are heard. How essential it is to demand that those who are in power take meaningful action to address the environmental emergency we are collectively facing, and to demand that States uphold their obligation to protect our human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.”

¹ Croatia, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Norway, Slovakia, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom.

² Croatia, France, Germany, Norway, Slovakia, the Netherlands.

Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention

A report presenting the findings of the workshop will be published in October 2023. It will inform the work of authorities and institutions at national, regional, and international levels on how to respond to peaceful civil disobedience in line with the requirements of the international human rights framework; and will serve as a basis to foster, across Europe, a response to peaceful civil disobedience that is respectful of States' obligations under said framework.



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