



Report on threats against Environmental Defenders in Africa

**Data trends from the African
Environmental Defenders Fund**

January 2022-December 2024



Table of contents

A note from the Coordinator

Introduction

Context and Rationale

Reflecting on the Current Trends

Types of threats against defenders

Drivers and Perpetuators of Threats

A Gendered Analysis of Trends

Country-specific trends

Uganda

Kenya

Democratic Republic of Congo

Madagascar

Senegal

Zimbabwe

Key Events and Campaigns

2024

Inaugural African Environmental Regional Convening in Kenya

Side Event at the Climate COP 27

2023

The 52nd Session of the Human Rights Council

Bonn Side Event: the Subsidiary Body 58

Handbooks for Environmental Defenders

The 28th United Nations Climate COP

Defenders Annual Conference by Defenders Coalition

Documentary – Protecting Tomorrow

Launch of the West Africa Directory for Environmental Defenders

2024

Defenders in Development Conference

Submissions to the Special Rapporteur on Uganda

African Environmental Regional Convening in Senegal 2024

The United Nations Biodiversity COP16

The Hidden Iceberg 2.0

The 29th United Nations Climate COP

Consultations with the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders

In Memoriam



A note from the Coordinator

As we reflect on the past three years,

I am inspired by the courage and resilience of environmental defenders across Africa. From communities standing up to large-scale development projects, to Indigenous leaders protecting forests and rivers, their unwavering commitment reminds us why our work is so vital.



The African Environmental Defenders Initiative has grown in reach and impact, supporting defenders through emergency support, documentation of violations, advocacy efforts, and strategic partnerships. Together, we have stood in solidarity with environmental defenders across Africa, bringing their stories and hopes to regional and global platforms, and we have seen the tangible results of our collective efforts in shaping global policies, protecting communities, and advancing environmental justice.

Yet, the threats remain real and urgent. As the triple planetary crisis deepens and Africa emerges as a new frontier for extractivism (which includes oil and gas, mining, and fossil fuel expansion), the role of the African Environmental Defenders Initiative has never been more critical.

Over the past three years, we have supported more than 230 environmental defenders, most of them operating in highly repressive contexts. These defenders face persecution, assault, abductions, forced evictions, intimidation, and harassment — and their fundamental freedoms are restricted for condemning destructive projects and protecting their communities from exploitation and displacement.

Our environmental defenders are the backbone of the fight against environmental injustice across the continent. They courageously stand on the frontlines where many cannot. Their sacrifices are the reason progress is possible — and they must never go unrecognized or unseen. Now more than ever, we must stand with them, protect them, and amplify their voices.

Thank you for walking this path with us, for standing in solidarity with defenders, and for believing in a future where both people and nature can thrive together.

Tawonga Chihana

Coordinator: African Environmental Defenders Initiative



Introduction

The African Environmental Defenders Initiative (AEDI) was established to strengthen the safety, visibility, and resilience of environmental and land defenders across Africa. Defenders are at the forefront of protecting land, natural resources, biodiversity, and community rights, yet they remain among the most at risk of harassment, intimidation, criminalization, and violence. This review document sets out AEDI's vision, priorities, and pathways for action over the past 3 years, building on lessons learned since the Initiative's launch and positioning it as a leading force for defender protection on the continent.

Context and Rationale

Africa is facing the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, compounded by aggressive extractive practices such as mining, oil and gas exploration, and large-scale land acquisitions. These pressures have made defenders' work both more urgent and more dangerous. Although their critical role has been recognized in international frameworks - including the Escazú Agreement, the Aarhus Convention, UN Human Rights Council Resolution 40/11, and UN General Assembly Resolution 76/300 - defenders frequently operate in hostile environments with little legal or institutional protection.

Many operate under restrictive laws that curtail freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, while communities defending land and resources endure forced evictions and displacement. Women defenders are particularly vulnerable, facing gender-based violence and stigmatization, alongside other risks.

Over the years, the AEDI has served as a vital protection and support mechanism for African environmental defenders, providing rapid response assistance such as legal aid, relocation, and psychosocial support.

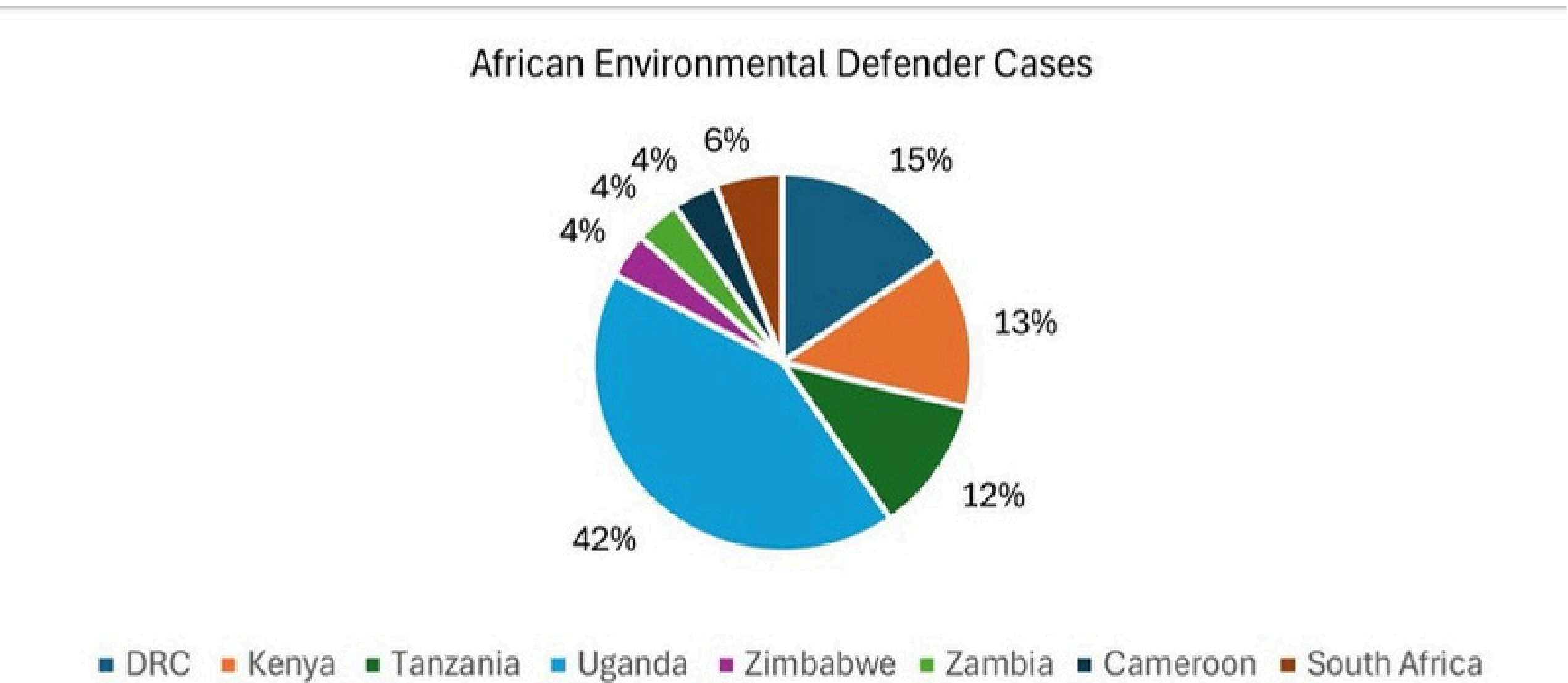
The following report shows the data collected over the years from 2022-2024 through the Emergency Fund application process. As the Fund is still gaining recognition across the continent, the data may not fully represent the state of attacks across the continent; however, it provides a picture of the nature and extent of threats. At all times, this report attempts to document and provide case studies reflecting on the trends, as seen by the Defenders Fund, which can provide policy makers, governments, businesses and civil society with a snapshot of the context in which defenders are working.



Reflecting on the Current Trends

Between 2022 and 2024, the Defenders Initiative has documented 232 non-lethal attacks against environmental defenders across Africa, an average of 57 attacks per year. These figures represent the number of applications the African Environmental Defenders Fund received in that time – and is in no way reflective of the true extent of attacks on defenders. However, this pattern underscores the persistent scale of violence and intimidation they face.

Despite their critical role in safeguarding the environment and human rights, defenders continue to operate in hostile environments with minimal legal or institutional protection. From our data, we can show the countries or regions where most of the threats or attacks are. The data shows us that 67% of non-lethal incidents have been reported in the East African region. Uganda recorded the highest number of attacks during this period, accounting for 42% of the total cases in Africa, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (15%), Kenya (14%) and Tanzania (12%).



This is not a coincidence. Uganda and Tanzania happen to be central to the production and processing of oil, and are currently involved in the development of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP). Those in opposition to EACOP have experienced a multitude of threats and non-lethal attacks, including mass-arrests at protests.

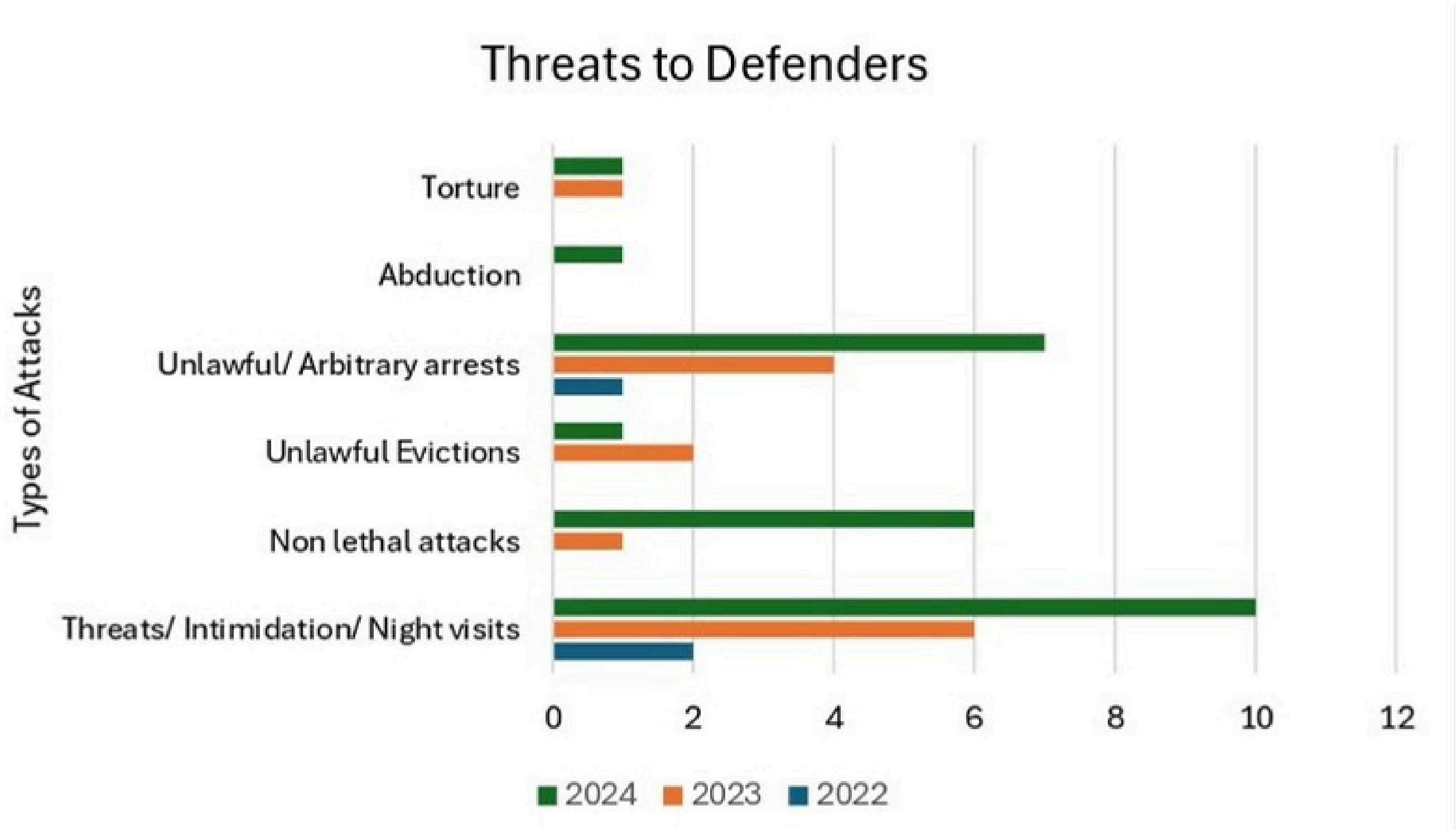
In Kenya, the LAPPSET project is a key source of conflict and threats against defenders. Natural Justice, who hosts the African Environmental Defenders Initiative, is working on a number of cases in which the human and environmental rights of people along the corridor have been impacted by the project. The Lamu Port development negatively impacted the fishing communities, who have subsequently received some compensation for loss of fishing sites, but land grabbing has also resulted in many farmers losing their livelihoods.

Reflecting on the Current Trends

Types of threats against Defenders

The threats against defenders are constantly evolving and becoming increasingly varied.

The data collected shows that, not only has there been an increase in non-lethal attacks against defenders, but the severity/seriousness of threats has also gone up. This intensity of threats against defenders is evidenced by a steady rise in abductions and incidents of torture being reported by applicant defenders between 2022 and 2024.



Drivers and Perpetrators of Threats

In 2024, 134 defenders were arrested, showing over a 12% increase of legal reprisals against defenders from the previous year. The vast majority (93%) of the arrested defenders are from Uganda and are activists who are protesting the production of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline.

In Africa, land is a critical economic asset, and its natural resources are central to securing economic interests that enable government officials to maintain power and privilege. This connection between resource control and political power is challenged by land and environmental defenders, who denounce and resist the exploitative activities of the State and multinational corporations.

For many defenders, land provides not only a livelihood, but also a sense of belonging and community, and is central to their heritage and communal practices. Having lived on the land for many generations, the call to resist their removal and dispossession is strong. However, governments and investors view land only for its potential for economic wealth.

The accumulation of wealth through dispossession poses a serious threat to land and environmental rights, as land grabs and unlawful evictions are routinely used to undermine the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. The unsustainable exploitation of natural resources for economic gain has placed these communities in direct conflict with the State, multinational corporations, and armed forces seeking to profit from resource extraction.

A defender's work garners serious threats on multiple levels where attacks come from the highest authorities and are perpetrated by neighbours and fellow community members.

Threats against land and environmental defenders are primarily driven by government (34%) and multinational or investment companies (20%) from the extractive and production industries, as they make up 64% of perpetrators of threats against environmental defenders.

Community members contribute towards 25% of reported attacks, with only 11% of attacks instigated by state forces or police officials.

Displacement and limited livelihood options often push local communities into environmentally harmful practices such as illegal logging, charcoal production, or land clearing for survival. When land and environmental defenders oppose these activities to protect ecosystems and uphold land rights, they are at times perceived as obstacles, rather than allies. This dynamic has fueled situations where local communities, under pressure and without alternatives, turn against defenders, even as both groups are ultimately affected by broader patterns of land dispossession and resource exploitation.



A Gendered Analysis of Trends



Although both men and women environmental defenders face similar threats due to their activism, women defenders experience these threats through a distinctly gendered lens.

The intersection of patriarchal power and shrinking civic space leaves women underrepresented in advocacy and decision-making, limiting their ability to address gender-specific environmental injustices. This lack of representation exposes them to systemic, patriarchal patterns of threat. While the type of threats may be similar to those faced by male defenders, certain elements are emphasized or weaponized against women because of their gender.

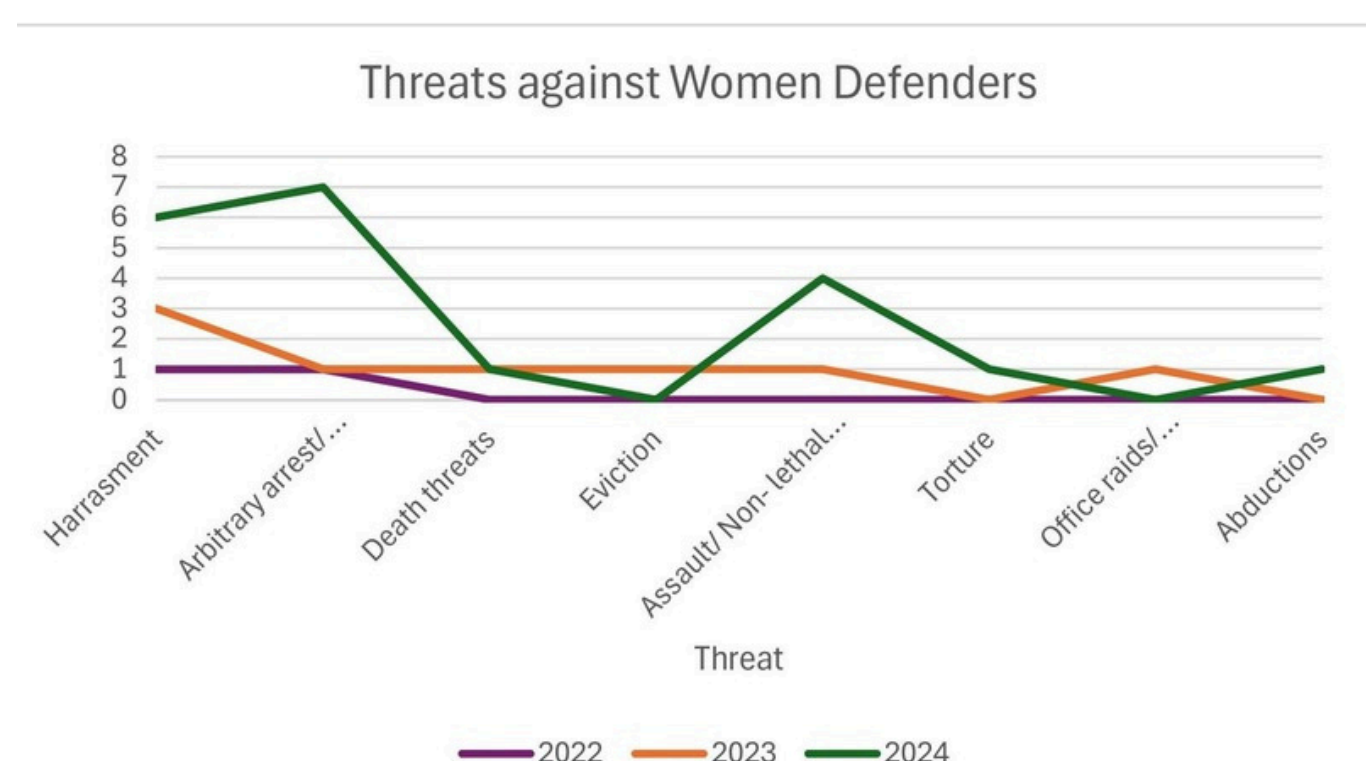
For example, when arrested, women defenders are often subjected to neglect of their health and hygiene needs. In some cases, sanitary pads, reproductive health care, or other basic necessities are deliberately withheld as a form of humiliation and control.

Such a case is that of a young woman student activist and member of Students against EACOP in Uganda - a non-violent student resistance movement. During governmental crackdowns in 2024, she was arrested, along with her fellow activists, and was detained for two weeks. During detention, the defender fell ill due to injuries incurred during her arrest, but her situation was exacerbated when she was refused sanitary products and subjected to harsh prison conditions disregarding her health and basic hygiene needs, an indicator of the double indignity suffered by women defenders.

Women defenders also face stigmatization and smear campaigns, often being portrayed as irresponsible mothers or accused of dishonoring their communities, which further isolates them socially and weakens their legitimacy as leaders.

In addition, unlike men defenders, women are frequently targeted through their families: children and relatives may face intimidation, placing added pressure on women to withdraw from activism. Communities may further ostracize women for failing to 'protect' their families or for not conforming to restrictive gender roles, leaving them disempowered both publicly and within the home.

Since 2022, through an increase in applications, we have witnessed the severity of threats against women defenders in our data, including an alarming number of abductions, direct death threats, and instances of assault and torture while in police custody. Particularly concerning is that the majority of threats (about 65%) take the form of legal reprisals, underscoring the systemic use of judicial mechanisms to silence and punish women defenders.



Country-specific trends

Uganda



Primary Areas of Conflict

Oil Extraction (East African Crude Oil Pipeline)
Land conflict in Acholi

Trends

Government and corporate actors are increasingly framing environmental opposition as economic sabotage or terrorism.

Surveillance and phone tapping of activists working on EACOP is increasing, especially during periods of international scrutiny (e.g United Nations Conference of the Parties meetings).

Arrests without warrant, Abductions and intimidation of activists opposing EACOP.

Use of NGO Act (2016), Public Order Management Act (POMA), Anti-Money Laundering Act to suspend operations or freeze accounts of civil society organisations.

Use of NGO Act (2016), Anti-Terrorism Act to justify restrictions on civic space, and abused of freedoms such as freedom of expression, association, assembly, and movement.

Civil society actors are subjected to financial audits, account freezes, or suspension of licenses under the guise of anti-money laundering enforcement.



Defenders from Uganda were assisted through 22 cases in the 3-year period. These cases represented a total of 166 defenders supported.

Kenya

Primary Areas of Conflict

Evictions for conservation areas and conservation-linked violence

Land acquisition for carbon offset projects

Kilifi Nuclear Project

Trends

Surveillance and labeling of defenders as “encroachers” or “foreign agents” is being normalized, especially for those working with international funders.

Police raids during community meetings, use of public order laws to prevent protests, revocation of Civil Society Organisation registration under the NGO Coordination Act.

Use of cyber laws to restrict freedom of expression.

Strategic court delays and administrative bottlenecks to frustrate land claims.

The North Rangelands Trust case

In January 2025, Kenya’s Environment and Land Court issued a landmark ruling against the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), ordering the closure of the Biliqo Bulesa and Cherab conservancies in Isiolo County for violating constitutional and statutory requirements, including the lack of public participation and disregard for community land rights.

The case, brought by local residents and pastoralist activist, Abdirahman Osman, highlighted how NRT had established conservation operations - such as ranger deployment and land demarcation - without consent from the unregistered community landowners.

Despite NRT’s claims of providing social benefits like water access and scholarships, the court emphasized that development cannot override constitutional land governance. This ruling marked a major victory for environmental and land rights defenders, setting a precedent for community-led conservation and legal accountability across Kenya.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Primary Areas of Conflict

Industrial mining of copper and cobalt
Biodiversity protection zones

Trends

Intimidation, forced disappearances, arrests without charge, fabricated criminal charges.

Blocking of non-government organisations' access to sites of environmental destruction.

Mining militarization: Armed forces and private security contracted by mining firms are used to forcibly remove communities or crush protests and intimidate communities near mining zones.

Corporate and military collusion in resource and biodiversity-rich zones.

A win for Environmental Justice in the DRC

The Goma Court issued a landmark ruling in favor of ACEDH (a Congolese environmental NGO), granting the organisation legal standing to hold the government of the DRC accountable for environmental degradation in the Virunga National Park. This is a significant victory for environmental justice in the country.

The court dismissed government objections and authorized both expert assessments by the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) and on-site inspections to evaluate encroachment and biodiversity loss.

This decision bolsters the long-standing efforts of environmental defenders who have worked tirelessly to protect Virunga (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) against threats; including illegal logging, mining, wildlife trafficking, militia invasions, and oil exploration interests backed by both multinational corporations and the state.

Defenders from the DRC were assisted through 8 cases in the 3-year period. These cases represented a total of 19 defenders supported.

Madagascar



Primary Areas of Conflict

Illegal logging and export of endangered wood
Protected areas and biodiversity protection zones

Trends

Conflict between conservation NGOs or activists and local communities.

Targeted arrests and intimidation by police.

Remembering Henri Rakotoarisoa



Environmental activist Henri Rakotoarisoa, aged 70 and president of the local conservation group VOI Mialo (Vondron'Olona Ifotony), was brutally murdered on 1 June 2022, near Moramanga, after years of exposing illegal logging within a threatened stretch of primary forest.

Found with his hands bound and fatal wounds to his heart and throat, the circumstances of his death remain chilling and emblematic of the violence faced by environmental defenders. Following intense civil society pressure and an investigation, eight individuals were sentenced to life imprisonment with forced labor, two received three-year prison terms for failing to assist in danger, and the victim's family was awarded damages—marking a rare instance of justice in Madagascar's environmental protection landscape.



Senegal

Primary Areas of Conflict

Coastal and extractive mining

Trends

Digital censorship and media crackdowns.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP suits).

Coastal communities are sidelined in environmental governance and mining project decisions, amplifying livelihood threats.

Crackdowns on protests and freedom of assembly.

Gas leak at Grand Tortue Ahmeyim project

The Grand Tortue Ahmeyim is one of Africa's deepest subsea gas developments, situated around 120km offshore on the Senegal-Mauritania maritime border. The project is operated by BP (majority stakeholder), in partnership with Kosmos Energy, Senegal's PETROSEN, and Mauritania's SMH, and is recognized as a "National Project of Strategic Importance" by both governments. It supports energy transition goals, exports gas globally, and allocates volumes for Senegal and Mauritania's domestic use.

A gas leak was reported in early 2025, and raised serious environmental concerns, particularly given its proximity to one of the world's largest deep-water coral reefs and ecologically sensitive marine zones along the Senegal-Mauritania coast. While BP and local authorities described the leak as minor with "negligible" surface impact, environmental groups such as Greenpeace Africa have warned that even low-level subsea leaks pose significant risks to marine biodiversity, fisheries, and food security.

The lack of transparency around the incident and limited community engagement has further deepened mistrust, especially among coastal communities already experiencing declining fish stocks and restricted access to traditional fishing grounds. Experts have emphasized the urgent need for stronger environmental oversight, independent monitoring, and contingency planning to ensure offshore energy projects do not jeopardize marine ecosystems and the livelihoods that depend on them.

BP and Mauritania say leak detected at gas project off West Africa

By Anait Miridzhanian and Késsima Diagana

March 5, 2025 4:07 PM GMT+2 · Updated March 5, 2025



Zimbabwe

Primary Areas of Conflict

Mining and pollution

Shrinking civic space

Trends

Harassment and victimization from corporate actors.

Widespread civic crackdown.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation.

Widespread civic crackdown in 2024

In mid-2024, as Harare prepared to host the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Summit, Zimbabwe experienced one of its most severe civic space crackdowns in recent years. Over 160 people, including opposition leaders, union members, students, journalists, and activists, were arrested between June and August, often during peaceful gatherings or commemorative events, such as those marking the Day of the African Child.

Many detainees were held incommunicado for days, subjected to torture or ill-treatment, and denied bail - in violation of constitutional protections. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, ZimRights, and other NGOs, documented surveillance, harassment, forced displacement, and physical assaults, including the removal of activists from an airplane and detention without identification.

Twenty-twenty-four marked a sweeping assault on Zimbabwe's civic freedoms, pushing voices of dissent, including environmental defenders, increasingly to the margins.

The Emergency Fund facilitated the safe relocation of an environmental defender who, fearing arrest, was unable to return home after attending an anti-repression workshop.

Featured

ZIMBABWE: 'The government is using widespread intimidation to silence pro-democracy voices'

Interviews / 03 September 2024

Key Events and Campaigns

Inaugural African Environmental Regional Convening in Kenya

In September 2022, the inaugural African Environmental Defenders Regional Reflection Meeting was held in Kilifi County, Kenya, bringing together land and environmental defenders from across the continent. The event was officially opened by Mary Lawlor, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and served as a vital platform for defenders to reflect, share experiences, and strengthen cross-regional solidarity.

Discussions highlighted widespread human rights violations linked to extractive and infrastructure projects, referencing emblematic cases such as the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project drilling in the Okavango delta in Namibia, and the eviction of the Masaai in Loliondo. Participants jointly developed a set of demands for the international community — calling on governments to honor climate commitments, recognize traditional knowledge systems, and respect the rights and work of environmental defenders.

A supplementary set of demands was also drafted for presentation by the Defenders Initiative at the 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27).



Side Event at the Climate COP 27

At the 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27), Natural Justice hosted a side event titled “**Environmental Defenders Advancing Climate Justice: Rights, Resilience, and Resistance.**” The event spotlighted the critical role of environmental defenders on the front lines of the climate crisis and emphasized the urgent need for their protection, recognition, and support.

The keynote address was delivered by Maria Silva, former Minister of Environment for Brazil, setting the tone for a powerful plenary discussion. Panelists included representatives from Global Witness, EarthRights, and the Asia Pacific Network of Environmental Defenders, who shared regional perspectives and strategies to strengthen the global movement for environmental justice.

The 52nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council

In March 2023, the African Defenders Initiative delivered a presentation at a side event held on the margins of the 52nd session of the UN Human Rights Council. The event, organised within the framework of the Geneva Roadmap 40/11 (launched in February 2020 in collaboration with the Geneva Environment Network and the University of Geneva), aimed to promote the implementation of UN Human Rights Council [Resolution 40/11](#) on the protection of environmental defenders.

The presentation helped highlight the African context and priorities within global discussions on the protection of environmental defenders.

Bonn Side Event: the Subsidiary Body 58

On the sidelines of the 58th session of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice and the Subsidiary Body for Implementation ([SB 58](#)) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)), in June 2023, the Coordinator for the AED Initiative was invited to speak at the side event, *"Value-Based and Human Rights Approaches to Address Climate Adaptation Issues for a Just GST Delivery"*. The event was organized by CambioMO, Earth Rights International and International Disability Alliance.

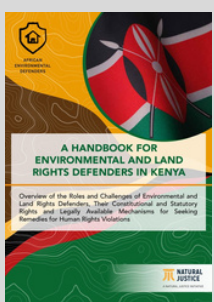
On this panel, civil society experts and party representatives discussed how adopting a human rights-based approach to climate change impacts could help address their real implications for people's lives.

Shifting the focus from purely technical solutions to values-driven responses supports an equity-based needs assessment, an essential foundation for the Global StockTake (GST). The GST, a process under the Paris Agreement, enables countries and stakeholders to collectively assess progress toward climate goals and identify where further action is needed.

Our coordinator called for a holistic, human rights-based approach to climate change, one that recognizes the persistent violations of environmental defenders' rights and the risks they face in confronting the climate crisis. She stressed that these defenders are consistently excluded from climate policy dialogues at the national, regional, and global levels. This lack of inclusion is reflected in the absence of explicit recognition in key global climate processes and frameworks such as the UNFCCC, Action for Climate Empowerment, and the Glasgow Climate Pact.

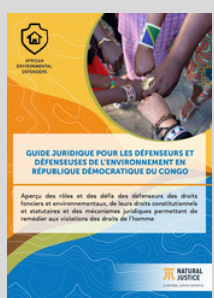
Handbooks for Environmental Defenders

The Defenders Initiative launched three handbooks designed to support African Environmental and Land Rights Defenders in their critical work. These resources provide practical guidance on navigating complex legal frameworks, accessing regional human rights mechanisms, and identifying key sources of support. The handbooks are tailored to specific contexts and are available online:



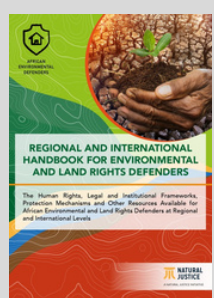
Kenya Handbook for Environmental and Land Rights Defenders:

<https://naturaljustice.org/publication/a-handbook-for-environmental-and-land-rights-defenders-in-kenya/>



Legal Guide for Environmental Women Defenders in the DRC (in French):

<https://naturaljustice.org/publication/guide-juridique-pour-les-defenseuses-de-lenvironnement-en-republique-democratique-du-congo/>



Regional and International Handbook for Environmental and Land Rights Defenders:

<https://naturaljustice.org/publication/regional-and-international-handbook-for-environmental-and-land-rights-defenders/>

The 28th United Nations Climate COP

The African Environmental Defenders Initiative, in collaboration with the Leaders Network for Environmental Activists and Defenders (LEAD) partners, organized an official side event at COP28 that brought together civil society experts, indigenous defenders from across the Global South, the UN Special Rapporteur for Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Brazilian Minister of Indigenous Peoples, Jozileia Kaingang.

The discussion focused on the plight of land and environmental defenders and their demands for stronger protection and justice. The Coordinator for the AED Initiative, Tawonga Chihana-Okoyo, presented the defender demands and gave the closing remarks.

COP28 also served as a platform to advocate for improved protection of environmental human rights defenders in the context of the climate crisis. The Natural Justice team pushed for explicit references to land and environmental defenders in UNFCCC negotiations and drew attention to the growing number of lethal and non-lethal reprisals they face.



Defenders Annual Conference by Defenders Coalition

In December 2023, the Defenders Initiative participated in and co-sponsored the Defenders Coalition Annual Human Rights Defenders Academy in Nairobi, Kenya. The event brought together 100 human rights defenders from across the country, working on diverse thematic issues within the human rights sphere.

The Academy's overall goal was to equip defenders with practical safety skills, enhance their capacity for advocacy through monitoring, documentation, and reporting of human rights violations for timely intervention, and strengthen their socio-economic resilience.

Natural Justice was represented by the East Africa Hub, led by former Hub Director, Nyaguthii Chege. The team facilitated training sessions on climate justice, climate impact assessment, and the protection and recognition of environmental human rights defenders. As part of the training package, participants also received the Defenders Initiative's legal guides on protecting environmental defenders.

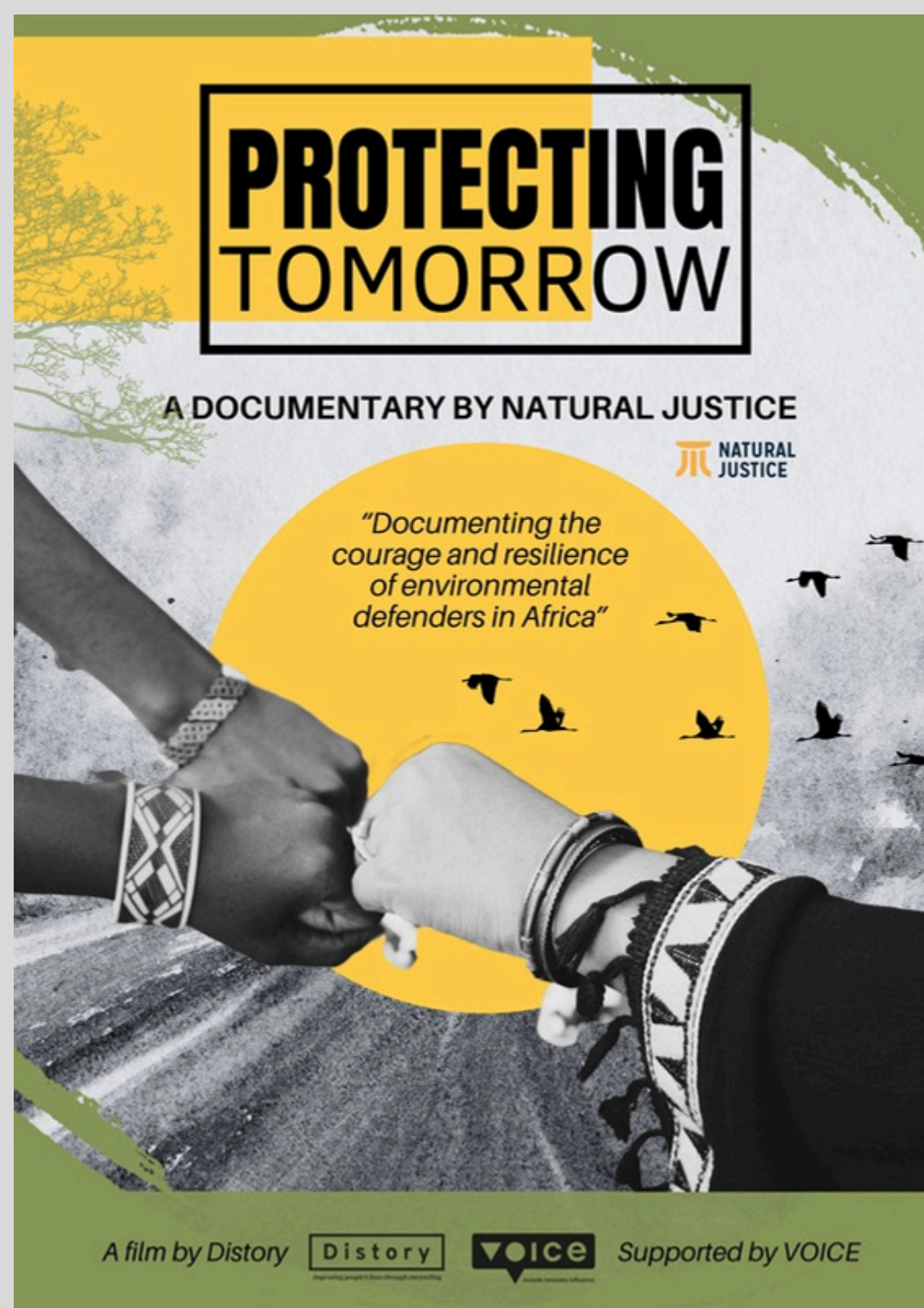
Documentary – Protecting Tomorrow

In June 2023, the African Environmental Defenders Initiative premiered the documentary Protecting Tomorrow at the Distory Amphitheatre in Nairobi. The film profiles the stories of environmental defenders across Africa, shedding light on their struggles and resilience.

The documentary focuses on the stories of the Sengwer in Kenya, the Maasai of Ngorongoro and Loliondo in Tanzania, the East African Crude Oil pipeline (EACOP) in Uganda and Tanzania, and the protection of the Ankazondandy Forest that culminated in the brutal killing of Henri Rakotoarisoa in Madagascar.

The two documentary screenings were organized to build solidarity with frontline defenders featured in the documentary and inspire a call to action to support environmental defenders facing heightened risks and threats for defending the environment and their land.

The documentary was featured in the *Kenyan Standard* newspaper, and has additionally been screened at various public forums including the Savonlinna International Nature Film Festival in Finland (August 2023), and the Warming Up Festival in Amsterdam (November 2023).



Launch of the West Africa Directory for Environmental Defenders

In January 2024, the Defenders Initiative participated in a three-day data collection knowledge-sharing workshop in Liberia. The workshop aimed to equip data collectors from 16 West African countries with the skills needed to monitor and address the chronic under-reporting of abuses against frontline defenders in Indigenous communities.

International organisations, including the International Land Coalition, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, and Global Witness, also took part, sharing their experiences, methodologies, and monitoring techniques for documenting violations and advancing the protection of defenders.

Defenders in Development Conference

In April 2024, the Coordinator for the Defenders Initiative attended the second Defenders in Development campaign meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia, which gathered 50 defenders and civil society representatives to address challenges in holding multilateral development banks accountable. Participants highlighted weak implementation of anti-reprisal policies, particularly in energy transition projects affecting Indigenous peoples and women, and called for stronger human rights due diligence mechanisms, and more proactive measures to prevent such reprisals.

Submissions to the Special Rapporteur on Uganda

In August 2024, the African Environmental Defenders Initiative, in partnership with Global Climate Legal Defense, Civicus, Youth for Green Communities, other organizations and the StopEACOP movement, submitted a joint communique to the African Commission and four UN Special Mandate Holders (UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, UN special Rapporteur on climate change and Human Rights, and UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Assembly and Association) calling for their intervention in the situation of environmental defenders in Uganda who have been facing severe persecution and gross violations of human rights for their involvement in a global campaign to halt the construction of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline.

In response:

- The African Commission adopted a [resolution](#) calling on the Uganda government to uphold and respect human rights
- UN Special Rapporteurs issued a joint letter to the Uganda government condemning the gross human rights violations in the country, and calling for the government to respect international law.
- UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus convention has issued a [public statement](#) to TotalEnergies demanding an investigation into the reported attacks against land and environmental defenders, and prompt action to address any operational shortcomings to ensure protection of land and environmental defenders in Uganda.

African Environmental Regional Convening in Senegal 2024

In September 2024, the African Environmental Defenders Initiative convened its second regional conference in Dakar, Senegal, bringing together around 50 land and environmental defenders from across the continent. The gathering served as a vital safe space for participants to share experiences, challenges, and best practices while reflecting on progress since the first convening.

It offered a collaborative platform to assess ongoing threats and build collective strategies for resilience. During the conference, the UN Special Rapporteur on Climate Change and Human Rights, Elisa Mongera, engaged directly with participants to gather insights and evidence that would inform her upcoming thematic report to the Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly. In keeping with tradition, delegates mapped out their priority issues and developed a set of demands, which were published and shared ahead of United Nations Conference of the Parties, for both the Biodiversity COP16 and Climate Change COP29.



The United Nations Biodiversity COP16



In 2024, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of the Parties (COP16) provided a critical platform for environmental defenders, civil society, and intergovernmental bodies to spotlight the biodiversity crisis and underscore the urgent need to include land and environmental defenders, who are on the front lines of biodiversity protection, as key actors in safeguarding the planet's ecosystems.

Natural Justice participated in and supported several side events on environmental defenders:

Closing the Gap: Promoting an enabling environment for environmental defenders advancing biodiversity and climate justice. This side event aimed to amplify the voices of land and environmental defenders and reinforce their essential role in addressing the biodiversity and climate crises.

LEAD Initiative Co-Creation Workshop: Organized by ALLIED and Global Witness, this dialogue session allowed Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) to share insights on the initiative's strategy ahead of its official launch at COP30, with discussions centered on strengthening their protection, recognition, and participation in multilateral environmental and climate spaces.

Data-Driven Protection: Monitoring the situation of environmental human rights defenders in Target 22. Natural Justice presented on the prevalence of non-lethal attacks on environmental defenders in Africa and the role of protection funds.



COP16 delivered notable progress for environmental defenders, including enhanced representation, stronger inclusion of Indigenous voices, and the initiation of benefit-sharing mechanisms. It established a subsidiary body under Article 8(j) to ensure the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in biodiversity decision-making, formally recognized the role of people of African descent in biodiversity conservation, and integrated diverse community knowledge into the global agenda.

The Hidden Iceberg 2.0

In 2024, the African Defenders Initiative strengthened its global advocacy by contributing its Africa-wide data on non-lethal attacks, collected in 2022, to the Hidden Iceberg report compiled by the ALLIED Data Working Group, which focused on 2022 data. Presented at the UN CBD COP 16 in October 2024, the report featured, for the first time, an integrated global dataset on widespread attacks against indigenous and local environmental defenders. This milestone elevated African representation in global data, advanced the Initiative's goal of closing the continent's environmental defender data gap, and provided a powerful accountability tool to engage governments, private companies, and influence policy.



The 29th United Nations Climate COP

At COP29, Natural Justice, EarthRights International, Global Witness, CambioMo, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and other partner NGOs organized a side event on environmental defenders, calling for urgent action to recognize and protect environmental human rights defenders who are often targeted for their activism. The event sought to raise global awareness of the threats faced by environmental defenders, journalists, and human rights activists, and to make violence against them more visible - including in the COP host countries.

However, the broader conference exposed a sharp disconnect between the advocacy for defenders and the overwhelming presence of fossil fuel interests. Activists denounced the outsized influence of fossil fuel lobbyists and issued calls for reform, calls that ultimately went unanswered.

Consultations with the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders

In December 2024, the African Environmental Defenders Initiative both participated in, and supported the participation of, environmental defenders from East and Southern Africa in online consultations organised by the Office of the UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention.

These consultations aimed to raise awareness about the Special Rapporteur's mandate and to discuss key threats, challenges, and priority concerns facing environmental defenders in East and Southern Africa.

In Memoriam

Environmental Defenders we have lost



Anton Mzimba
South Africa, 2022



Esmond Bradley Martin
Kenya, 2018



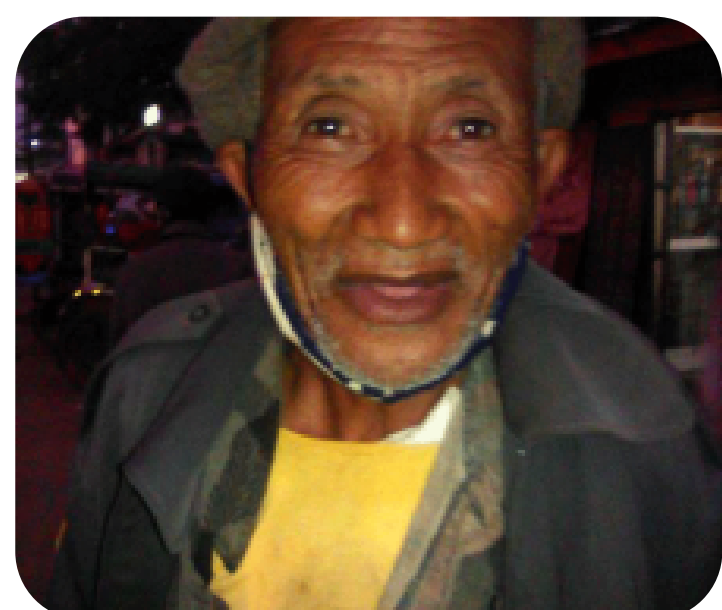
Hama Balima
Burkina Faso, 2019



Sikhosiphi Radebe
South Africa, 2016



Fikile Ntshangase
South Africa, 2020



Henri Rakotoarisoa
Madagascar, 2022



Roger Gower
Tanzania, 2016



Godfrey Luena
Tanzania, 2018



Joannah Stutchbury
Kenya, 2021



Gamal Sarour
Egypt, 2017



Emmanuel Essien
Ghana, 2019



Wayne Lotter
Tanzania, 2017