

Defending Environmental Defenders in the Philippines



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Our world is in a state of emergency. Human civilization, as we know it today, is threatened by the exploitation of nature and people, which leads to environmental destruction, climate change, and social deprivation. Young or indigenous people often become the first line of defense against this injustice. As they stand up for a better future, the work of climate activists or land and environmental defenders often involves great personal sacrifice. Sometimes it

even culminates in death: in the past decade, more than 1,700 defenders were killed worldwide (Global Witness, 2022).

Over the last few years, the number of victims increased. Most of the murders occurred in Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines. The latter was ranked the fourth most affected country in the Long-Term Climate Risk Index (CRI) from 2000 to 2019 (Eckstein et al. 2021). One reason is the country's high exposure to record-breaking typhoons that increased in intensity over the years. High climate risks and the failure to protect environmental defenders are a counterintuitive combination. However, the observation goes along with the country's poor capacities in coping with and adapting to disasters due to complex political and socio-economic conditions (see also, Atwii et al., 2022).

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In the Philippines, fertile lands and natural resources attract corporations, foreign investors, and corruption, leading to conflicts with local and indigenous communities. Most reported murders of environmentalists in the Philippines are connected with agribusiness, mining, a coal boom, and luxury tourism (Global Witness, 2019). In the case of agribusiness, land is stolen from indigenous people and then used by ranchers, who partner with global brand companies. When the indigenous leader Renato Anglao demanded local ranchers and the mayor in 2017 to return the land that the mayor's business was using for agribusiness in cooperation with the US-based Del Monte, Renato was threatened and shot dead (Global Witness, 2019). The business contracts have been extended even after the murder.

The current boom in tourism has its downsides, as activists and even environmental officials are threatened in their fight against illegal logging of timber for luxury hotels. Ruben Arzaga, a village head, NGO member, and environmentalist, was shot dead while confiscating illegal timber, even though he got help from the police (Global Witness 2019). The NGO he was part of lost eleven members due to murder since 2001. The perpetrators were not convicted in any of the abovementioned cases.

Therefore, the call to action for governments, companies, and investors is this: Clarify, secure, and accept the land rights of local and indigenous communities. Protect the personal security of defenders. International laws and standards must be respected even when large profits are at stake. Investigate the attacks and hold the aggressors accountable for their crimes. Companies and investors are called upon to cooperate fully in this regard. And in cases when they do not, governments should cease their permits.



Village elders protesting the granting of a mining permit
(Photo: [Joshua Kyle](#) on [Unsplash](#))



Call to action placards (Photo: Author)

The call to action for civil society is to hear and pass on the defenders' messages and to demand the protection they deserve. When basic human rights such as Article 3 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person," and Article 20, "Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association" are violated, what comes next? The defenders stand for the majority of us. If our first line of defense falls, what will happen to the rest of us? 🌱

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About the Author

My name is Anna Dietl and I study at Hiroshima University in Japan and the University of Graz in Austria. How come that I am student at two universities so far apart? I am doing the "Joint International Master in Sustainable Development", more precisely a Double Degree, with a focus on "Global Development Policies". This means that I study one year in Japan and one year in Austria. I hold a bachelor's degree in "Environmental Systems Sciences" and want to become an expert on the intersection of developmental issues and climate change. [LinkedIn](#)

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