



WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

DONATE

HOME

ABOUT US

ISSUES

HUMAN RIGHTS
BY COUNTRYWHERE WE
WORKHUMAN RIGHTS
BODIESNEWS AND
EVENTSPUBLICATIONS AND
RESOURCES

English > News and Events > DisplayNews

COVID-19: “Not an excuse” to roll back environmental protection and enforcement, UN rights expert says

[Arabic](#) | [Chinese](#) | [Russian](#) | [Spanish](#)

GENEVA (15 April 2020) – COVID-19 must not be used as an excuse to weaken environmental protection, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, David Boyd said.

“In light of the global environmental crisis that predates COVID-19, these actions are irrational, irresponsible, and jeopardize the rights of vulnerable people,” he said. The expert’s statement comes after a number of governments announced that they are lowering environmental standards, suspending environmental monitoring requirements, reducing environmental enforcement, and restricting public participation.

“Such policy decisions are likely to result in accelerated deterioration of the environment and have negative impacts on a wide range of human rights including the rights to life, health, water, culture, and food, as well as the right to live in a healthy environment,” the UN expert said.

“The science is clear. People living in areas that have experienced higher levels of air pollution face increased risk of premature death from COVID-19. Similarly, access to clean water is essential in preventing people from contracting and spreading the virus,” Boyd said. “The global pandemic highlights the vital importance of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.”

The UN expert noted that three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases are ‘zoonoses’ - meaning they jump from wild or domesticated animals into humans. This includes Ebola, SARS, MERS, and now COVID-19. “Scientists warn that deforestation, industrial agriculture, illegal wildlife trade, climate change and other types of environmental degradation increase the risk of future pandemics, raising the probability of major human rights violations,” Boyd said

“As COVID-19 is demonstrating, pandemics can undermine the rights of billions of people, especially those who are already vulnerable to environmental harm including people living in poverty, minorities, elderly, indigenous peoples, women and children.

“The short-sighted decision to weaken or suspend environmental regulations will make things even worse. Instead, governments need to accelerate efforts to achieve the [2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#), because a healthy environment is an effective way to prevent pandemics and protect human rights.

“In light of the global environmental crisis that predates the COVID-19 pandemic, States should step up their efforts to protect the environment, not step back,” the expert said.

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Dr. David R. Boyd was appointed as the [UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment](#) for a three-year term commencing August 1, 2018. He is an associate professor of law, policy, and sustainability at the University of British Columbia. He has advised many governments on environmental, constitutional, and human rights policy and co-chaired Vancouver’s effort to become the world’s greenest city by 2020. He is a member of the World Commission on Environmental Law, an expert advisor for the UN’s Harmony with Nature Initiative, and a member of ELAW, the Environmental

Law Alliance Worldwide.

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