

5. ENVIRONMENT

Sustainable development is: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Bruntland Commission, 1987



Human beings are an integral part of their environment and the environment impacts on all aspects of human life, including human rights. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment formally recognized the interrelation of environment and human rights, affirming that ‘man’s environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights – even the right to life itself’.¹

Environmental rights belong to the so-called category of **third generation** or **collective rights**. These are rights that affect whole societies or groups of people rather than just individuals, and include those such as the right to peace, to sustainable development, to communication or to share in the common heritage of humankind. Collective rights, such as the right to a healthy environment, acknowledge that human rights exist not only for individuals in a political and social system but for all people united as fellow beings in interdependent systems that transcend nation states. For example, global warming affects all living things, regardless of what country they are in. Just as each individual must respect the intrinsic value of fellow human beings, he or she must also respect the value of all fellow beings: animals, plants and the ecosystems in which we all exist.

The environment impacts on people’s human rights both positively and negatively. It plays an essential role in ensuring human life, providing the raw materials for our food, industry and development. However, environmental hazards, such as excess radiation or contaminated drinking water, can also threaten the fundamental right to life. People exposed to pollution of the soil, air or food and water supplies may be subject to human rights violations as well as bad health, genetic damage, loss of livelihood and even death. Many fundamental human rights have significant environmental dimensions: the right to health, to safe and healthy working conditions, to adequate housing and food, to work and to an adequate standard of living.

Environmental issues in Europe

Europe faces major environmental concerns that may have an impact on future generations:

- **Air pollution** from heavy industry and fossil fuels directly impacts on human health and all living things.
- **Climate changes** resulting from global warming and the greenhouse effect may impact on future generations with drought, severe storms and loss of arable land.
- **Water availability** and quality is a major concern.
- **Modern mass-consumption and domestic waste** has a negative impact on the environment, e.g. excessive use of private cars, plastic bags, packaging and wrapping.
- **Genetically modified organisms** (GMOs), whose genetic material has been altered by the introduction of a modified gene, can have long term consequences on human health, the environment and sustainable farming.

Children and the environment

In 2004 European Ministers adopted the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE), which addresses the environmental risk factors that most affect the health of European children. This action plan focuses on four regional priority goals for Europe:²

- Ensure safe water and adequate sanitation
- Ensure protection from injuries and adequate physical activity
- Ensure clean outdoor and indoor air
- Aim at chemical-free environments.

Critical to achieving these goals is raising children's own awareness and understanding of the environment and how environmental issues relate to human rights.

QUESTION: *What are the major environmental issues in your community? How can children become actively involved in addressing them?*

Children can play an active role in protecting and improving the environment. At the personal level, they can evaluate and change their own lifestyle and how it affects the environment (e.g. preserving resources such as water and electricity, not wasting food). At the local level they can participate in plans to make their homes, schools and youth organisations more environmentally friendly (e.g. use of safe products, disposal of waste, recycling of different materials). Children can evaluate the policies and practises of their local, regional and national communities and make suggestions for improvement. They can join in campaigns and global celebrations such as Earth Day and World Environment Day.

World Environment Day, June 5, was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972. It can be celebrated in many ways, including street rallies, bicycle parades, green concerts, essays and poster competitions in schools, tree planting, recycling efforts and clean-up campaigns. Each year World Environment Day has a special theme, such as 'Melting Ice – A Hot Topic?', 'Don't Desert the Dry Lands!' and 'Green Cities: Plan for the Planet!'.³ Earth Day, April 22, is coordinated by the Earth Day Network, which works together with other environmental and human rights organisations, for example, the Sierra Club and Amnesty International, to generate public action through celebrations and activities in protest against human rights and environmental abuses.⁴



Sustainable development

We are now living in a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), called for by the United Nations General Assembly from 2005-2014. What does 'sustainable development' mean? The Brundtland Commission, which met in the 1980s, defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."⁵ Another key international document for sustainable development is Agenda 21, which was presented at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and has since been accepted by 172 governments. The implementation of this comprehensive action plan is taking place at a global, national and local level by governments, NGOs and international organisations together, and was followed by the World Summit of Sustainable Development in 2002. Sustainability is not just about conserving the environment, but about learning to live in respectful relationships with each other and with our world. So education for sustainable development means learning the values, behaviours and knowledge that will enable us to develop now without robbing future generations of the same possibility.⁶

Children can begin to understand the long term impact of people's actions on the environment by studying their immediate surroundings and then extending what they learn to a global context. If, for example, the city council decides to build a road across a green area in the town, children may lose a place to play and to observe the natural life it contains. Only by caring and thinking about those who come after us can we keep our planet in good health for the future.

The European Environment Bureau, a network of almost 150 environmental non-governmental organisations in Europe, works on raising awareness of issues related to sustainable development in Europe and mobilizes population and governments for continuous improvement.

Relevant Human Rights Instruments

Council of Europe

The fact that the **European Convention on Human Rights** does not mention the environment should come as no surprise. It was adopted in 1950, when few people were aware of the far reaching effects of environmental degradation. The ECHR makes many references to 'the *economic* well-being of the country', but not its ecological well-being. Likewise it affirms the importance of and 'the protection of health'. It does not, however, recognize the importance of a healthy environment in creating a healthy population, although efforts are being made to have environmental aspects of human rights recognised by the European Court of Human Rights.⁷

United Nations

As with the European Convention, early human rights instruments, such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and the two **Covenants**, precede general awareness of the importance of the environment and consequently make no reference to it. However, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child does make specific reference to the environment in Article 24.c in the context of the child's right to health, urging governments

To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution[.]

Furthermore Article 24.e urges environmental education for parents and children as a part of general health education. Article 29.e includes it among the goals of a quality education to which every child has a right:

The development of respect for the natural environment.



The gradual recognition of the right to a healthy environment illustrates how the **human rights framework** is evolving, with new rights being recognized, defined and ultimately being **codified** in human rights instruments. At present a drafting committee is at work on a convention on environmental rights. This can be a long and contentious process, involving building consensus, consultation with governments, **inter-governmental organisations** and **non-governmental organisations**.

Useful resources

- *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 1972: <http://un-documents.net/unchedec.htm>
- *Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health: Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe*: World Health Organisation, 2004: www.euro.who.int/document/e83338.pdf
- Garcia San José, Daniel, *Environmental protection and the European Convention on Human Rights*: Council of Europe, 2006.
- *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, Resolution 42/187: United Nations, 1987: www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm
- *Links between the Global Initiatives in Education, Education for sustainable development in action*, Technical Paper N 1: UNESCO, 2005: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001408/140848m.pdf>

Useful websites

- Development Education Program: www.worldbank.org
- Development Education Association: www.dea.org.uk
- Earthday Network Homepage: www.earthday.net
- Epaedia, Environment explained: <http://epaedia.eea.europa.eu/>
- European Environment Agency: www.eea.europa.eu/
- European Environmental Bureau: www.eeb.org/Index.htm
- European Union Environmental Communication Networks (with best practises from EU countries): http://ec.europa.eu/environment/networks/bestpractise_en.htm
- Green Peace: www.greenpeace.org
- United Nations Division for Sustainable Development: www.un.org/esa/sustdev/
- United Nations Environment Programme: www.unep.org
- Veolia Environment – Tales around the world youth campaign: www.veoliaenvironnement.com/globe/en/

References

- 1 *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 1972.
- 2 *Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health: Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe*: World Health Organisation, 2004.
- 3 See United Nations Environment Programme: www.unep.org
- 4 See Earthday Network Homepage: www.earthday.net
- 5 *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*: United Nations, 1987.
- 6 *Links between the Global Initiatives in Education, Education for sustainable development in action*, Technical Paper N.1: UNESCO, 2005.
- 7 Garcia San José, Daniel, *Environmental protection and the European Convention on Human Rights*: Council of Europe, 2006.

