



The ERA Secretariat is hosted by Green Advocates International  
Corner of Benson and McDonald Streets  
Monrovia – Liberia

Email: [mrucsoplatform@gmail.com](mailto:mrucsoplatform@gmail.com)

WhatsApp: +231 886 529 611

Motto:

Campaigning for Environmental Justice and Defender Rights



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001

# ERA PERIODICAL

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**Key Achievements (2021–2025)**

**ERA at a Glance: 2021–2025 Milestones**

- Conducted and published the West Africa Baseline Assessment.
- Completed four case studies in Ghana, DRC, South Africa, and Kenya.

**Expanding the Movement**

- Built a growing coalition of CSOs across Africa.
- Convened the first in-person member meeting in Freetown.

**Strategic Direction**

- Adopted a 5-year roadmap guiding collective action.
- Established a continental governance structure with Regional Anchors and Working Groups.

**High-Level Engagements**

- Engaged the ACHPR, AU, UNHRC, UNEP, the Escazú COP in Chile, and African regional bodies.

**Donor Support**

- Strengthened by partnership from the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundation (OSF).



**Message From the Steering Committee**



**Ahmad Abdallah**

Dear colleagues, partners, and allies in the pursuit of environmental justice, We are proud to launch the inaugural edition of The ERA Periodical, a platform dedicated to amplifying the voices, experiences, and aspirations of communities and defenders working to protect Africa's environment and natural heritage. More than a bulletin, this publication is a record of the growth of a continent-wide movement grounded in solidarity, resilience, and the shared conviction that environmental rights are fundamental human rights. Communities in Africa continue to confront the realities of pollution, land dispossession, climate impacts, and extractive-driven injustices. Environmental and land defenders stand at the forefront of these struggles, often at grave personal risk. Among them,

Indigenous peoples play a foundational role; as rights-holders, as custodians of ancestral lands, and as bearers of knowledge systems that have sustained ecological balance for generations. Their commitment and courage continue to inspire collective action and shape the mission and vision of the Environmental Rights Africa Coalition (ERA). This periodical documents their struggles, elevates their voices, and records the progress being made across the continent. ERA envisions an Africa where the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is fully recognized, protected, and realized for all. We believe that environmental democracy—including access to information, public participation, access to justice, protection of environmental defenders, and

recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights—is essential to safeguarding both communities and ecosystems. The time has come for a stronger regional environmental rights framework capable of advancing accountability and strengthening the implementation of existing commitments by African states. This first edition captures key developments and engagements from across the continent, including strategic dialogue with regional institutions, grassroots mobilization efforts, research and advocacy initiatives, international exchanges, and reflections from defenders on the frontlines. It also reflects the growing momentum behind ERA's continental agenda, made possible through the commitment of partners, allies, and supporters. With support from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, ERA continues to strengthen its institutional capacity and expand its role as a unified African platform advancing environmental rights and justice. The ERA Periodical is both an invitation and a commitment: an invitation to remain informed and engaged, and a commitment to continue building stronger alliances and collective action for environmental justice across Africa. While the challenges remain significant, the movement continues to grow, partnerships continue to deepen, and the vision of a just and sustainable future for all is not a distant promise, it is what we are building, now. Together, we will shape an Africa where communities are protected, ecosystems are respected, and environmental rights are upheld for present and future generations. In solidarity,  
Ahmad Abdallah  
Chairperson  
ERA Steering Committee

# UNEP Hosts Expert Consultation

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) hosted a high-level consultation on human rights and Africa’s environmental crisis in Nairobi from 12–13 July 2025. The meeting convened experts from academia, civil society, Indigenous communities, national human rights institutions, the African Commission, the African Court, and sub-regional judicial bodies. It

and the worsening vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples, women, children, persons with disabilities, and environmental defenders. At the same time, the continent’s rich biodiversity, cultural traditions of stewardship, and historic leadership—seen in the African Charter’s early recognition of environmental rights—remain core strengths.

are stepping up, including NANHRI’s new climate unit. Civil society coalitions such as ERA are driving coordinated advocacy for stronger standards.

Still, major gaps persist: weak enforcement, fragmented institutions, shrinking civic space, and limited incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems.



offered a rare space for collective reflection on how to strengthen environmental rights amid escalating climate, biodiversity, and pollution emergencies.

Participants began with a shared understanding: Africa contributes the least to global emissions yet suffers disproportionately from climate-induced displacement, biodiversity loss, toxic pollution,

### Stocktaking

Experts noted real progress. All African states now recognize the right to a healthy environment through constitutions or legislation, while landmark African Commission and Court rulings—from SERAC v. Nigeria to Endorois v. Kenya—continue to shape global environmental justice. National human rights institutions

### Key Priorities

Participants highlighted urgent needs—better implementation of judicial decisions, enhanced protection for environmental defenders, and stronger corporate accountability in the extractive sector. They stressed that harmonizing and modernizing environmental laws is essential,

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# Why the Continent Needs a Regional Environmental Legal Framework

Africa’s climate crisis is no longer abstract—floods in East Africa, droughts in the Sahel, and storms like those in Derna, Libya, are devastating lives and livelihoods. These disasters reveal a pattern of environmental instability that national laws alone cannot contain.

Africa now has a rare opportunity: a Regional Environmental Rights Agreement—a continent-wide framework to protect the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. This is the vision of Environmental Rights Africa (ERA), a coalition of 55+ civil society organizations and grassroots defenders across 40+ countries, formed in 2021 to address transboundary environmental threats.

### A Cross-Border Crisis

Pollution, extractive operations, and climate-driven displacement do not stop at borders. Yet most

African states rely on weak national laws, offering limited transparency, inconsistent enforcement, and little protection for environmental defenders. ERA research across West and East Africa, and in the DRC, South Africa, and Ghana, shows widespread repression, shrinking civic space, and unregulated corporate activity—gaps that only a regional framework can fill.

Such an agreement would guarantee access to information, meaningful public participation, and justice when harm occurs. It would protect defenders, harmonize standards across the continent, and prevent industries from exploiting regulatory gaps. In short, it would strengthen governance while centering the rights and safety of communities.

### Momentum Is Building

Latin America has Escazú. Europe has Aarhus. Africa—the region most affected by climate change—deserves no less.

ERA has engaged the ACHPR, UNEP, the AU, Indigenous leaders, and several governments. In 2025, with support from the Ford Foundation and OSF, ERA adopted a five-year strategy, expanding case studies, regional anchors, and expert working groups. The Nairobi UNEP consultation marked a watershed moment, signaling growing continental support for a new environmental rights instrument.

### A Future We Must Choose

A Regional Environmental Rights Agreement is about dignity, justice, and survival—for farmers in Malawi, families in Senegal, and defenders from Liberia to Mozambique. History will judge whether Africa seized this moment. The question is not whether the continent needs a regional agreement—but whether it will act now.

## Strengthening Ties with Sierra Leone's Minister of Justice



*In the Office of Sierra Leone's Justice Minister, standing right with Alfred*

As part of a broader effort to cultivate African government champions for their continental initiatives, a delegation from Environmental Rights Africa (ERA) and the African Climate Platform (ACP) paid a courtesy visit to Sierra Leone's Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Mr. Alpha Sesay, on Thursday, October 30, 2025, in Freetown.

The visit was led by Sierra Leonean partners Abu Brima, Mucktarr Raschid, and Esther Kandeh, joined by Alfred Brownell, Radiatu Khanplaye, and Peter Quaqua, who stopped in Freetown enroute from Banjul after participating in activities around the 85th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

The delegation updated Minister Sesay on progress made since the ERA-ACP gathering in Freetown earlier this year and discussed ways to strengthen collaboration at national, regional, and continental levels. A formal letter was presented requesting his support in advancing both ERA and ACP processes across West Africa and the wider continent. The team also appealed for his intervention with the African Court to request an extension of the 90-day deadline for states to submit observations on the Advisory Opinion.

Minister Sesay warmly welcomed the delegation and reaffirmed his commitment to championing environmental rights and climate justice. He emphasized that his role goes

beyond that of a government ally, noting that he considers himself an extension of the civil society movement where he began his advocacy career.

The visit builds on a longstanding relationship. Earlier this year, in February, Minister Sesay addressed the opening session of the inaugural collaborative conference for African-based climate, environmental, and natural resources activists in Freetown—an event that brought together both ERA and ACP networks.

While in Freetown, the team also participated in the inaugural National Conference on Human Rights and Climate Change organized by the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission.

## Start From Page 2 UNEP Hosts Expert Consultation

particularly as development pressures fuel land conflicts, evictions, and conservation-related abuses.

### What Works

Proposed practical measures included clearer access to information, stronger public participation, better compliance mechanisms (including environmental courts), and protection against SLAPP suits. Securing land rights, improving civic education, and expanding access to remedies were deemed crucial. Cross-border cooperation, anti-corruption efforts, and cultivating political champions were identified as decisive for lasting progress. Above all, participants emphasized that environmental protection must be inclusive and community-driven,

not top-down.

### Learning from Other Regions

Models such as Latin America's Escazú Agreement, the ASEAN Declaration, and the Aarhus Convention offered lessons on defender protection, public participation, and rapid-response mechanisms. This sparked debate over whether Africa needs a new regional environmental treaty. Views diverged, but participants strongly supported the African Commission's development of a General Comment on the right to a healthy environment. They saw it as a critical chance to clarify state obligations, strengthen procedural rights, address corporate responsibility, and better protect Indigenous Peoples and marginalized groups. Successful adoption will require broad

consultations, fundraising, and close engagement with member states.

### Commitments and the Path Forward

The meeting closed with firm commitments: civil society vowed to expand monitoring and advance its five-year action plan; UN agencies and regional institutions pledged continued support; donors committed to strengthening capacity and African-led coordination.

The consultation ended on a unifying message: Africa faces profound environmental threats, but it also possesses the tools, experience, and collective will to advance environmental rights—if stakeholders act with urgency, strategy, and solidarity.



*Participants at the Expert Meeting*

## Insights From Chile: Testing the Plausibility of an African Agreement

At the 2024 Santiago “Lessons Learnt” Conference, ERA joined global partners to reflect on what an African regional environmental rights agreement could look like. In a panel on Environmental Democracy in Africa, Emily Kinama drew on ERA’s case studies in the DRC, South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya, showing how defenders across the continent face similar systemic challenges: weak access to courts, rampant criminalization, extractive industry abuses, and colonial-era barriers to information. “Laws and information are kept secret... many people don’t even know their rights,” she noted, emphasizing that even countries with strong laws struggle with implementation. Lack of resources, limited scientific capacity, and basic obstacles like accessing documents or filing complaints further weaken accountability. Her reflections led to key questions: Should Africa pursue a binding agreement? What should it contain? And how would it be implemented? A presentation by Dorcas Faida Sikujua—shared by Fiona Iliff (ABA

CHR) and Joseph Burke (URG)—highlighted the extreme risks faced by defenders in the DRC, where conflict, insecurity, and targeted attacks have forced many to flee to Goma. Environmental defenders, often from rural or Indigenous backgrounds, remain especially vulnerable.

### Lessons From Escazú: Why It Worked

Panelists Napoli, Joara Marchezini, and Patricia Madrigal shared insights from Latin America’s Escazú Agreement. Success, they explained, depended on a strong civil society network, a supportive secretariat, and a shared vision among negotiators. A major turning point was the recognition in Article 9 that environmental and human rights are inseparable. But the path was difficult—political resistance, mistrust, language barriers, and endless debates over whether the agreement should be binding slowed progress. Humility and strategy were essential: leaving egos behind, uplifting credible voices, finding allies inside government, and ensuring quieter

participants had space to contribute.

### Challenges Still Abound

Even today, Escazú faces hurdles. Countries like Peru and Brazil have resisted ratification, misinformation campaigns sow confusion, and issues like open data and emerging technologies remain under-addressed. Yet the panelists stressed that Escazú’s evolution shows what is possible when persistence, solidarity, and public participation converge. “At first, it felt like defeat. But over time, a thousand doors began to open,” one speaker reflected. The Chile conversations offered both caution and hope. The question for Africa is not whether the Escazú success is possible, but how the continent can design a homegrown agreement that reflects its histories, institutions, and community needs. Achieving this will require political courage, sustained consultation, and a strong civil society movement. As ERA continues its research and alliance-building, the lessons from Chile stand as both a roadmap and a reminder of what it will take to get there.



Cross section of ERA Delegates in Chile

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which is reviewing the 2019 African Transitional Justice Policy, confirmed that environmental and climate justice remain underdeveloped areas within continental peacebuilding frameworks. The Unit described ERA/ACP’s intervention as timely and potentially transformative, opening a pathway to integrate environmental justice into transitional justice and conflict-prevention mechanisms.

### Key Outcomes and Commitments

The joint engagement produced a number of meaningful outcomes that set the stage for deeper collaboration with the African Union. AU officials openly acknowledged the value of ERA and

ACP’s contributions, noting how their work aligns with continental priorities on peace, security, and justice. They encouraged the networks to follow up with formal communications, a step that would help structure future engagement and anchor the partnership within AU institutional processes. Equally important, participants reached a shared understanding of key priorities—ranging from addressing environmental drivers of conflict to strengthening regional frameworks and closing the gaps that persist in transitional justice policy. The meeting also helped expand ERA and ACP’s institutional access, establishing new focal points within AU

departments and strengthening the channels for continued dialogue. The AU visit marked a critical moment in the push to elevate environmental rights and climate justice within Africa’s policy and institutional landscape. With AU Technicians appreciating the relevance of ERA and ACP’s agenda, this meeting laid the foundation for a more formalized, long-term partnership. Key AU officials in attendance were: Earnest Dolo, Coordinator of the Silencing the Guns Unit (headed Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas), Dr. Philip Attuquayefio, AU Advisor on Climate, Peace and Security, and Eugene Bakama of the Transitional Justice Unit.



## AU Visit Reveals Key Triggers of Conflict

Environmental Rights Africa (ERA) has taken a significant step in advancing its campaign for a continent-wide environmental rights framework, following a high-level joint engagement with African Union (AU) technical staffers on 10 September 2025. The meeting, held at AU Headquarters in Addis Ababa during the Africa Climate Summit, brought together leading representatives from ERA and the African Climate Platform (ACP) to present their shared agenda for strengthening environmental governance, climate justice, and the protection of vulnerable communities across the continent. ERA leaders, including Steering Committee Chair Ahmed Abdalla and Lead Campaigner, Alfred Brownell, presented the coalition’s core objective: the development of a regional environmental rights agreement rooted in African realities. Drawing inspiration from global standards such as the Escazú and Aarhus Agreements, ERA’s

framework emphasizes four pillars—access to information, public participation, access to justice, and protection of vulnerable and Indigenous communities. Delegates highlighted ERA’s work with grassroots groups, its case studies documenting environmental harms, and its engagement with governments to build political champions for environmental rights. AU officials welcomed the clarity of ERA’s proposal and recognized its relevance in addressing emerging environmental drivers of conflict across Africa. **Linking Climate Obligations and Human Rights** The engagement also served as a platform to advance the ACP’s ongoing effort to clarify African states’ human rights duties in responding to the climate crisis. Dzimababwe Chimbga, lead drafter of the Advisory Opinion request, and June Okelo of PALU outlined the petition submitted to the African

Court. The petition seeks authoritative guidance under the African Charter on states’ climate obligations. The Court has already invited AU organs and Member States to submit observations—an important step that ACP hopes will encourage broad state participation. AU Technicians acknowledged the significance of the petition and its potential contribution to global climate jurisprudence. Other members of the delegation were, Peter Quaqua, Radiatu Kahnplaye and Dorcas Faida. AU departments—including Peace and Security, Climate, Peace and Security, and the Transitional Justice Unit—noted the growing convergence between climate impacts, environmental degradation, and conflict. Officials stressed that while climate change may not directly cause conflict, it magnifies vulnerabilities that can ignite instability. The Transitional Justice Unit,

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A Team of ERA/ACP at the AU

## The Freetown Rally for Environmental Democracy

Activists, legal experts, and civil society leaders from every corner of the African continent converged in Freetown for a week-long meeting of the Environmental Rights Africa (ERA) initiative — to seek pathways for the adoption of a regional environmental rights framework. Since 2021, ERA has amplified the voices of frontline defenders and communities living with the daily impacts of environmental degradation. Yet, despite existing legal protections in many countries, enforcement remains weak and civic spaces continue to shrink under political and corporate pressures. The urgency for a regional agreement of some sort has never been greater. “This meeting marks a defining moment for environmental rights in Africa,” said Alfred Brownell, Lead Campaigner. “We are not just discussing policies — we are building a movement that will ensure African communities have

the legal tools to protect their lands, waters, and livelihoods.” From 17 to 21 February, the coalition deliberated and finalized a five-year strategic plan that will guide efforts around environmental democracy, protect land and defenders, as well as advance stronger legal framework that holds governments and corporations accountable for environmental injustices. Participants discussed and mapped out challenges, and designed strategies to engage governments, the African Union, ECOWAS, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), African governments and other regional and intergovernmental bodies. A key outcome of the gathering was the adoption of a five-year work program, align with ERA’s long-term goals of research, advocacy, and coalition-building. The strategy seeks to strengthen governance structures by clarifying the roles of regional and national

focal points; designing government engagement strategies and identifying potential state champions to advance treaty negotiations; and developing a sustainable funding plan through partnerships and donor support. The energy in Freetown was profound. It was more than a planning session — it reaffirmed civil society’s collective will to demand environmental rights. The decisions made will shape the next five years of advocacy, influence national policies and pave the way for a continent-wide environmental rights framework. With deforestation, land grabs, pollution, and climate change mounting across Africa, the stakes could not be higher. As the week ended, ERA emerged with a renewed mandate, a stronger coalition, and a bold vision for the future — one where environmental rights are not just recognized, but actively enforced across the continent.



Delegates at the Freetown Gathering

# THE FREETOWN DECLARATION

Adopted at a Collaborative Conference on African-Based Climate, Environmental, Natural Resources Rights and Protection Tools and Mechanisms Held at Hotel Barmoi, Freetown, Sierra Leone 17-21 February 2025

We, the representatives of the Public Interest Lawyering Initiative for West Africa (PILIWA), the Environmental Rights Africa Coalition (ERA), the African Climate Platform (ACP), and the Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform (MRU CSO Platform), convened in Freetown, Sierra Leone, from 17 to 21 February 2025, in a spirit of collaboration and determination, to advance the protection of the environment, human and natural resources rights across Africa.

Acknowledging the increasing threats posed by climate change, environmental degradation, the infringement of natural resource rights on local communities and indigenous peoples across the continent;

Recognizing the urgent need for a consolidated and strategic approach to strengthen legal frameworks, advocacy, public interest litigation, and environmental rights; ensure climate justice; and safeguard vulnerable and indigenous communities on the frontline of the climate crisis;

Affirming our commitment to promoting environmental democracy, transparency, and accountability in the governance of natural resources, climate policies and community rights in Africa;

Further Recognizing our inherent right to self-determination, to a healthy environment, and to the sustainable management of our resources;

Mindful that our indigenous peoples have historically relied upon the land, water, air and natural resources for livelihoods, cultural practices, and well-being;

WE RESOLVED TO:

1. Condemn and demand an immediate halt to all extractive activities, land grabbing, and environmentally harmful projects that lack the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) of vulnerable and marginalized local communities.
2. Strengthen Regional Cooperation by establishing a collaborative framework to facilitate cross-border advocacy, legal interventions, and policy engagement for the recognition and protection of environmental defenders and environmental rights.
3. Promote Legal and Policy Reforms to support the development and enforcement of comprehensive legal instruments at national, regional, and continental levels to protect local communities, environmental defenders, and ecosystems.

4. Advance Climate and Environmental Justice by mobilizing legal practitioners, civil society organizations, and affected local and indigenous communities to challenge harmful environmental practices and advocate for rights-based climate solutions.
5. Enhance Advocacy for the Protection of Environmental Defenders to develop effective response mechanisms to mitigate risks faced by environmental and climate justice defenders, ensuring their safety and ability to operate freely.
6. Facilitate Research and Documentation for the conduct of comprehensive assessments and case studies to build local resilience, and inform evidence-based advocacy and decision-making on environmental rights and climate governance.
7. Engage with Regional and International bodies to strengthen engagement with African Union institutions, sub-regional bodies, and international mechanisms to reinforce the implementation of environmental rights and climate justice commitments, and
8. The collaborating organizations, networks and platforms agreed, among other things, to remain engaged, strengthen cohesion, improve solidarity, and leverage various expertise to advance environmental rights protection, capacity-building initiatives, strategic litigation, livelihood support for defenders and affected local communities and policy interventions across Africa.

As we conclude this landmark conference, on the theme: *“Building a Just Future: Advancing Advocacy for Natural Resources, Social Justice, Civic Engagement, Environmental Rights and Defenders Across Africa,”* we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to stand together in defense of Africa's environmental climate justice agenda, and support of community and natural resources rights and defenders.

We call upon governments, regional bodies, and international partners to support and uphold the principles outlined in this Declaration for a sustainable and just future for all.

Done in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the 21st Day of February 2025.

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## Consulting on the General Comments: ERA's

- Stronger corporate accountability, especially in the extractives and critical minerals sectors.
- Community-led conservation, instead of militarized approaches.
- Integration of environmental justice in peacebuilding, including recognition of ecocide.

In closing, Commissioner Dersso praised the depth of civil society

contributions and reaffirmed that environmental rights—one grounded in experiences, strengthened by regional law, and propelled by defenders and communities on the frontlines of ecological harm. Its outcomes will help shape what may become one of the continent's most significant normative developments in decades: a clear, authoritative interpretation of Article 24 of the African Charter—affirming every African's right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

## Africa's Air Crisis: ERA Calls for Urgent Action on Clean Air

On the 6th International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies, Environmental Rights Africa (ERA) issued a statement calling for urgent action to confront one of the continent's most pervasive but least visible crises: air pollution.

Polluted air is harming millions — from urban residents breathing exhaust fumes to rural communities exposed to gas flaring, mining emissions, and industrial smoke. ERA warns that these impacts are deepening inequality, worsening health outcomes, and placing the heaviest burden on women, children, and frontline communities.

ERA emphasizes that the African

Charter guarantees the right to a “satisfactory environment,” making clean air not a privilege but a legally protected human right. Weak enforcement, industrial impunity, and poor environmental governance mean that this right remains largely unrealized.

The ongoing Advisory Opinion request before the African Court, supported by ERA and other partners, seeks clarity on African states' obligations in addressing climate-related harms, including toxic air. ERA sees this as a landmark opportunity to strengthen accountability.

From the Niger Delta to major African capitals, air pollution is linked to respiratory illnesses,

premature deaths, and worsening climate impacts. ERA stresses that “business as usual” will continue to endanger lives, undermine economic development, and erode community resilience.

ERA calls for stronger regulation of emissions, investment in clean energy, and an end to dangerous practices like gas flaring. Corporations must adopt cleaner technologies, while governments must enforce existing laws and protect environmental defenders.

This year's global clean air observance underscores the urgency of their message: Clean air is a fundamental human right — and Africa must act now to protect it.

# ERA PERIODICAL

## Environmental Rights Africa News Bulletin

## Consulting on the General Comments: ERA's Contribution



**ACHPR Commissioner Solomon Dersso, Chairman, Working Group on Extractive Industries, Environment and Human Rights,**

**E**RA and partners convened a regional consultation on 19 September 2025, bringing together more than 100 activists, experts, community leaders, journalists, and international partners to inform the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' (ACHPR) development of a new General Comment on the Right to a Satisfactory Environment.

The consultation aimed to inform the intersession thematic report to be presented during the 85th Ordinary Session of the ACHPR (21–30 October 2025). This thematic report also underpinned the drafting of a General Comment on the Right to a Satisfactory Environment Favorable to Development, mandated by Resolution ACHPR/Res.633 (LXXXIII) 2025. The session—co-moderated by Paul Mulindwa of CIVICUS and Fiona Iliff the American Bar Association's Center for Human Rights—was perhaps one of the most diverse civil society inputs into the Commission's

environmental rights work to date. 222 people had registered to participate in the consultations, in addition to the online contributions. Opening the discussion, ERA Chair Ahmad Abdallah highlighted the urgency of strengthening environmental protections as communities across Africa grapple with pollution, land grabs, extractive exploitation, and intensifying climate impacts. He emphasized ERA's mission to ensure access to information, meaningful participation, justice, and defender protection—particularly for rural and Indigenous communities.

UNEP's representative Richard Ncube echoed Africa's historic leadership in embedding environmental rights in the African Charter—decades before the UN adopted similar standards. But he stressed the need for clearer state obligations and stronger safeguards as environmental degradation escalates.

ACHPR Commissioner Solomon Dersso, who leads the Working Group on Extractive Industries, Environment and Human Rights,

underscored the importance of the General Comment in consolidating jurisprudence, defining duties, and improving accountability. He noted that Africa's collective rights tradition offers a strong foundation, but implementation remains uneven.

### **Defenders Under Threat, Communities Under Pressure**

Participants also shared sobering realities from the ground, describing escalating harassment and arrests of environmental defenders in places such as Uganda, Nigeria, and the DRC. They drew attention to forced evictions of Indigenous peoples carried out under the guise of conservation, as well as pollution and displacement linked to large-scale development projects in Kenya, Liberia, and Namibia. Corporate impunity—often reinforced by weak governance or elite collusion—was highlighted as a persistent challenge, alongside language and information barriers that prevent communities from fully participating in decisions that affect them. Journalists, frequently the first to uncover environmental abuses, were also recognized as frontline defenders in urgent need of explicit protection.

### **Key Recommendations to the Commission**

Participants urged the ACHPR to advance:

- A strong legal framework on environmental rights, addressing gaps and clarifying obligations.
- Protection mechanisms for environmental human rights defenders, including anti-SLAPP safeguards.
- Better access to justice, urging states to ratify the African Court Protocol.

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## ERA Constitutes Leadership to Drive Africa's Environmental Justice



**Chairman Ahmad Abdallah**

**A**t its General Membership Meeting on 26 August 2025, the coalition of more than 55 civil society organizations formally endorsed a newly elected Steering Committee (SC)—a diverse leadership team that reflects the breadth of Africa's regions, languages, and generations.

Ahmad Abdallah (North Africa anchor) of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms was elected Chairperson, joined by Saran Touré (West Africa anchor) of Plaidoyer Recherche et Renforcement de Capacités des ONG as Co-Chairperson. Their pairing embodies ERA's commitment to balance and inclusivity, ensuring that gender, youth representation, and linguistic diversity remain central to the coalition's governance.

The Steering Committee's regional anchors span the entire continent. The other three representatives are

Waldia Keza Shaka, East Africa anchor (Defend Defenders); Olivier Ndoole, Central Africa anchor (Alerte Congolaise pour l'Environnement et les Droits de l'Homme – ACEDH) and Thuli Makama, Southern Africa anchor (Oil Change International)

Together, they represent ERA's pan-African vision and its determination to elevate grassroots and regional leadership. The regional representation is complemented by several thematic Working Group leads. They are: Paul Mulindwa (CIVICUS), Outreach & Advocacy WG; Emily Kinama (Katiba Institute, Kenya), Case Studies; Lucien Limacher (Natural Justice, South Africa), Defenders Emergency WG; Fiona Iliff (ABA, Zimbabwe), Technical Drafting WG; Philip Jakpor (Renevlyn Development Initiative, Nigeria), Communications WG; Francis Colee (Green Advocates, Liberia), Fiscal Sponsor; Dr. Wanjira Mathai (WRI Africa & Global Partnerships) and Alfred Brownell

(USA/Liberia), Lead Campaigner. The Steering Committee also includes two international observers, Joseph Burke and Elizabeth Moses of ALLIED. Collectively, the SC is mandated to provide strategic direction, oversee implementation of ERA's five-year plan, mobilize resources, and ensure strong internal governance.

In his acceptance remarks, Chairperson Abdallah pledged to place communities and defenders at the center of ERA's mission:

“I am deeply honored and humbled to serve as Chair of ERA, not just with gratitude, but with a profound sense of duty to our continent and our communities. Our struggle is not abstract — it is the struggle of farmers losing their lives to droughts, of coastal communities watching the sea rise, of indigenous people defending their sacred lands. It is the struggle of courageous defenders who face violence, intimidation, and death for speaking truth to power. Our mission is to ensure these voices are not silenced, but amplified — placed at the very center of Africa's climate agenda and environmental rights. Together, we will work for a binding African agreement to empower defenders, and to write a new chapter where environmental rights are not just aspirations, but realities.”

His words set the tone for a continent-wide push for a stronger instrument that empowers defenders and turns environmental rights from aspiration into reality. The SC will serve the coalition for two years, as per the Terms of Reference of the body.

## Panelists Warn of Rising Threats against Defenders

When delegates gathered in Banjul for the 85th Ordinary Public Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), the urgency was unmistakable. Rising temperatures, polluted rivers, shrinking forests, widening inequalities, and escalating attacks on environmental defenders have brought Africa to a critical turning point.

At the center of this shift is

A Pivotal Conversation Working with the ACHPR's Working Group on Extractive Industries, Environment and Human Rights (WGEI), ERA hosted a side event on 25 October titled "Advancing the Protection and Promotion of Environmental Rights in Africa." Though only forty participants attended, the dialogue carried regional significance: Africa is edging toward a more coherent and enforceable environmental rights

African-Led Solutions ERA Chair Ahmad Abdallah framed the discussion against the continent's lived realities. Africa contributes little to global emissions yet suffers disproportionately—from the Derna floods to chronic food insecurity and climate displacement. Abdallah stressed that responses must be African-led and grounded in law, not dependent on external frameworks.

ACHPR Commissioner Solomon



L- R: Commissioner Dersso, Adama, Alfred, Ahmad, Fiona and Walda

Environmental Rights Africa (ERA)—a fast-growing coalition of lawyers, activists, researchers, and community defenders committed to ensuring that environmental rights in Africa are recognized, protected, and enforceable. Their mission in Banjul went far beyond attending the session. It formed part of a continent-wide strategy to strengthen the legal foundations of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

regime. The event reinforced a growing consensus: environmental protection is no longer a subsidiary concern—it is a core human rights issue. Across the continent, climate change, resource extraction, and industrial expansion intersect with questions of justice, equity, and governance. ERA's engagement with the Commission is part of a broader attempt to anchor African environmental protection in law, evidence, and institutions.

Ayele Dersso reinforced this point by highlighting ongoing work to draft a General Comment on Article 24—the right to a satisfactory environment under the African Charter. For the first time, the Commission is developing a standalone interpretation that positions environmental rights as autonomous and deserving focused protection. Dersso underscored how climate impacts, extractive industries, and shrinking civic

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## African CSOs Pray the Africa Court for an Advisory Opinion

In a landmark step for environmental and human rights protection, the African Climate Platform, Resilient40, Natural Justice and the Environmental Lawyer Collective for Africa—working with the Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU)—submitted a historic petition to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights on May 2, 2025.

The group is requesting an Advisory Opinion on African States' human rights obligations in the context of climate change—the first civil society-driven climate petition ever brought before the Court. Experts say it could redefine Africa's climate justice landscape and strengthen intergenerational equity across the continent.



"Africa's poor must not pay for the lifestyle of historical emitters," said Alfred Brownell, Lead Campaigner of the African Climate Platform. "This petition is a plea for justice for communities already facing catastrophic droughts, floods, rising temperatures, and worsening displacement."

Grounded in the African Charter, the Maputo Protocol, the Kampala Convention, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the petition calls on the Court to clarify what African states are legally required to do in the face of the climate crisis. It asks the Court to affirm that governments must safeguard fundamental rights—including life, health, food, water, housing, and a clean and healthy environment—and to set clear standards for climate adaptation, resilience, and addressing loss and damage. The petition further seeks guidance on protecting the continent's most vulnerable groups—Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and environmental defenders—while holding multinational corporations and historical polluters accountable.

It urges the Court to articulate principles for a just energy transition,

promote decolonized natural resource governance, and establish a zero-tolerance stance on reprisals against those who speak out.

Across the continent, frontline voices echoed the human toll of the climate crisis. From North Africa, Ahmad Abdallah described a region already buckling under water scarcity, displacement, and the devastating tragedy of Derna—evidence that climate change is no longer a future threat but a present human rights emergency.

In Southern Africa, Lucien Limacher of Natural Justice warned that the worst drought in a century is pushing 61 million people toward hunger, with women and girls bearing the heaviest burdens.

From CIVICUS, Dr. Paul Mulindwa highlighted the growing repression facing environmental and land defenders who stand between vulnerable ecosystems and powerful interests.

In West Africa, Peter Quaqua reported record heat waves and collapsing cocoa yields that are destroying livelihoods and driving communities deeper into poverty. The situation is no

different in Central Africa, where Dorcas Sikujua Faïda described how flooding, drought, and rising conflict are tearing families and economies apart.

Speaking for women and youth, Shahinaz Adel and Inna Maria Shikongo stressed that climate injustice magnifies gender inequality, pushing women and young people into cycles of vulnerability.

Representing Indigenous Peoples, Agnes Kabujuni reminded the continent that those who have contributed least to global emissions now suffer the most severe consequences. And from the legal community, PALU's June Cynthia Okelo delivered a clear message: Africa must no longer be treated as a shock absorber for the world's polluters.

The petition signals a major turning point in Africa's legal response to the climate emergency, calling on the Court to affirm that environmental harm is a human rights violation. The Court has since acknowledged the petition, and notified African government, AU organs and other individuals for submit observations

## An Acquaintance Evening with the Mandate Holders



*ERA Strategic Advisor, Clement Voule conducts the Session with Commissioners*

During the 85th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in Banjul, ERA, in partnership with the African Climate Platform (ACP), carried out a strategic outreach mission aimed at advancing visibility of the initiatives. The mission focused on deepening engagement with the Commission, building institutional relationships, and exploring collaborative approaches to address the growing environmental and climate risks facing African communities.

On 24 October 2025, ERA and ACP hosted an Informal Acquaintance Dinner at the Bakadaji Hotel, bringing together eight of the eleven Commissioners, their legal officers, and the Commission's Executive Director. The dinner provided a platform for ERA and ACP representatives—including Ahmad Abdallah, Alfred Brownell, and Zimbabwe Chimnga—to present ongoing initiatives, including the Advisory Opinion request before the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which seeks clarity on States' environmental and climate obligations under the African Charter.

Discussions were dynamic and forward-looking. Commissioners engaged with the presentations,

offering constructive reflections on advancing collaborative approaches within the African human rights system. ERA and ACP reaffirmed their commitment to serving as technical and contextual resource partners to the ACHPR. Both Commission Chairperson Hon. Idrissa Sow and Dr. Litha Musyimi-Ogana, Co-Chair of the Working Group on Extractive Industries, Environment, and Human Rights Violations, welcomed the initiative and expressed support for continued collaboration.

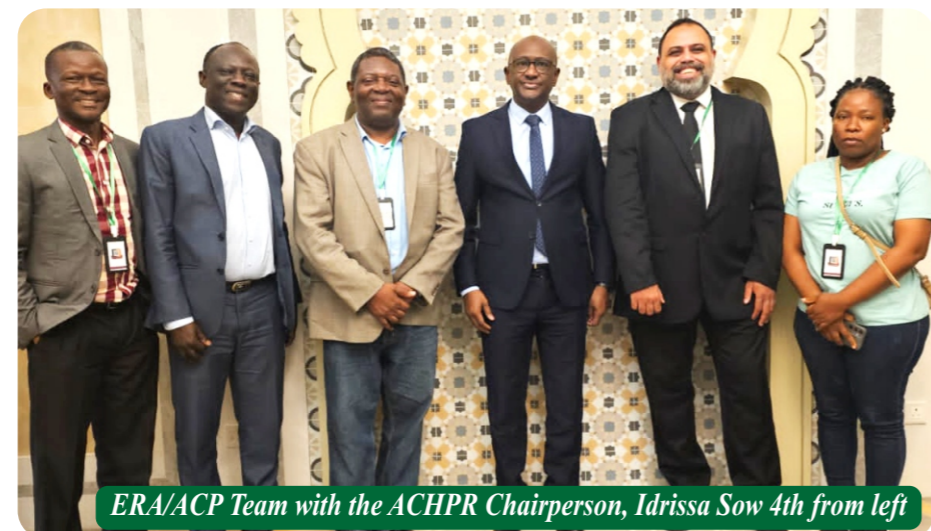
### Bilateral Encounters

Ahead of the delegation's departure from Banjul, on 26 October, ERA and ACP paid a courtesy visit to Chairperson Idrissa Sow. The conversation, though brief, was productive. The Chairperson

highlighted thematic areas closely aligned with ERA's advocacy—including environmental defenders, reprisals, economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR), gender, migration, indigenous peoples, and enforced disappearances. He encouraged ERA to coordinate through the Executive Secretary to identify concrete areas for collaboration and praised the initiative's proactive engagement.

In addition to the moment with Chairperson Sow, the ERA delegation had informal yet valuable interactions with Commissioners Rémy Ngoy Lumbu (Mandate Holder on Reprisals and Human Rights Defenders) and Mudford Zachariah (Mandate Holder on ESCR). These corridor meetings, coupled with photo opportunities, helped strengthen entry points for deeper collaboration and underscored the Commission's openness to partnership.

Through these engagements, ERA and ACP continue to consolidate their role as strategic partners within the African human rights system, advancing a continental approach to environmental and climate justice and fostering institutional collaboration to safeguard the rights of African communities and environmental defenders.



*ERA/ACP Team with the ACHPR Chairperson, Idrissa Sow 4th from left*

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## Panelists Warn of Rising

space converge to heighten risks for communities and defenders.

### Evidence, Risk, and Resilience

Representing the American Bar Association and ERA's Drafting Working Group, Fiona Iliff detailed the pressures faced by environmental defenders—from criminalization and surveillance to arbitrary arrests in countries such as Nigeria, the DRC, and South Sudan. She emphasized that without strong civil society documentation, strategic litigation, advocacy, and rapid response systems, abuses will continue unchecked.

Liberian lawyer Alfred Brownell, speaking from decades of frontline experience, offered one of the session's most compelling interventions. He outlined structural failures—from weak safeguards and poor public participation to limited access to justice—that leave communities vulnerable. Drawing on his work with ERA and the African Climate Platform (ACP), he highlighted two major efforts: the push for a regional environmental rights framework and the Advisory Opinion request filed before the African Court soliciting submissions, he urged

African institutions, civil society, and academics to engage actively.

In a video presentation, Anna Lorena of the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances warned of increasing reprisals against land and environmental defenders. She called for stronger national laws, better data collection, mandatory human rights due diligence, and the suspension of high-risk projects. Structural drivers—weak governance, discrimination, corporate influence, and corruption—must be addressed holistically, she emphasized.

### The Role of Donors

From the Open Society Foundations (OSF), Adama Dembere reaffirmed long-term support for defenders and institutions, noting OSF's nearly USD 100 million investment in environmental rights and critical minerals programs. He highlighted the need for strategic funding, stronger institutional capacity, and better enforcement of existing standards. On the debate over a regional treaty, he acknowledged OSF's initial openness but underscored the importance of research to identify true gaps.

### Looking Ahead

Speakers consistently stressed that

environmental rights lie at the intersection of law, governance, culture, and activism. Solutions must be community-centered and backed by cross-border coordination, rigorous monitoring, and alignment with emerging global norms on climate accountability and corporate responsibility.

Closing the discussion, Abdallah invoked ancient African traditions of stewardship, reminding participants that environmental protection is rooted in Africa's moral and cultural heritage—not imposed externally.

The Banjul dialogue crystallized the promise and complexity of advancing environmental rights on the continent. ERA and its partners now look ahead to strengthening the General Comment on Article 24, contributing to the African Court's climate Advisory Opinion, and exploring the feasibility of a binding regional treaty.

Africa has the expertise, the history, and the momentum to lead globally on environmental justice. The challenge now is to turn principles into practice through legal innovation, political will, and unwavering protection for those defending the continent's land, water, and climate.



*A section of the audience at the Side Event*

# ERA ACTIVITIES IN PICTURES



*Comm Remy sandwiched by ERA members*



*Adama, Comm Dresso, Alfred & Ahmad in Banjul*



*The ACHPR Ex. Secretary with Alfred & Ahmad @ the dinner*



*Engagement with ACHPR Chairman SOW*



*In the corridor with Commissioner Remy*



*A view of participants at Escazu CoP3*



*Commissioners & the legal officers at the dinner*



*A section of guest at the dinner with the ACHPR*



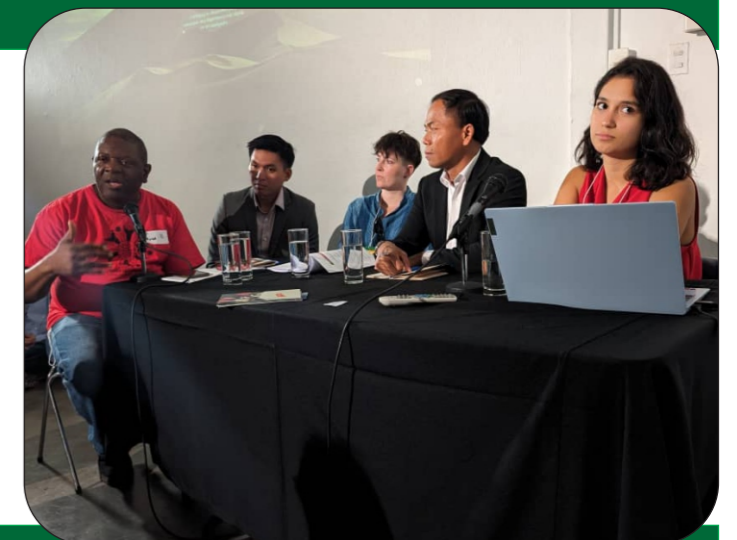
*Scene from the Freetown gathering*



*Freetown participants*



*Brainstorming session in Freetown*



*Scene from Chile*