YEE!
YOUTH AND ENVIRONMENT EUROPE

KNOW your RIGHTS

A Pocket Guide for Young Environmental Defenders



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This Pocket Guide was produced by and is the responsibility of the educational team of the study session **'UNITING FOR A SAFER EUROPE: EMPOWERING ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS'** organised by Youth and Environment Europe (YEE) in cooperation with the Youth Department of the Council of Europe (CoE) on 1-5 September 2025 at the European Youth Center in Strasbourg (EYCS).

It does not represent the official point of view of the Council of Europe.

Youth – Jeunesse

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INTRODUCTION

What is it?

A summary of practical, up-to-date information for environmental activists to use in their day-to-day work

When to use it?

- Preparing to contact or speak with decision-makers
- During protests or demonstrations as a reference
- In educational or training settings
- On-the-go for emergencies or legal guidance
- As a pocket reference for your rights and actions during legal or political challenges

What information does it include?

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Relevant human rights frameworks protecting the rights of environmental defenders

2. Protests.....5

Why we protest, assessing risks, safety checklist, mental health & wellbeing, handling emergencies, anti-protest laws and SLAPPs, recommended actions & escalation pathways

3. Anti-Protest Laws and SLAPPs.....12

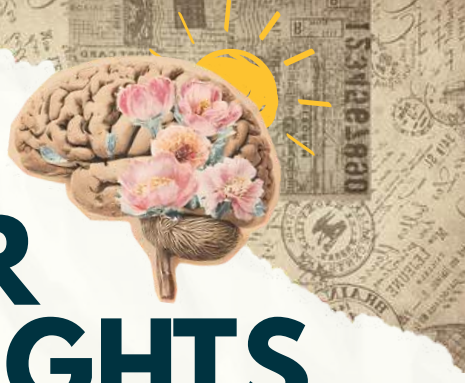
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Digital activism, collecting evidence, safety tools and best practices, legal supports and remedies to call out abuses

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KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

International human rights law guarantees basic rights to those who defend the environment, such as the right to life, the right to speak freely, and the right to gather in groups, and protects them when they face violations. General protection is also enshrined in Art. 12 of the **UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.**

#INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

Protects **the right to life** through:

- **The freedom of expression**, protected under Art. 19,
- **The right to petition the government**, protected under Art. 20,
- **The right to peaceful assembly**, protected under Art. 21,
- **The freedom of association**, protected under Art. 22,
- **The right to political participation**, protected under Art. 25.

#AARHUS CONVENTION (1998)

Grants the public (including defenders) three main rights in environmental matters:

- **Access to information** to know about environmental risks. (Article 4 & 5)
- **Public participation** to take part in decision-making on environmental issues. (Article 6, 7, 8)
- **Access to justice** to challenge environmental harm or violations of the above rights. (Article 9)

#EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS (ECHR, 1950)

Although there is no explicit reference to the environment in the ECHR, it has been interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to protect environmental defenders through:

- **The right to life** (Article 2) when environmental harm threatens people's lives,
- **Prohibition of inhuman/degrading treatment** (Article 3) in cases of severe environmental harm,
- **Freedom of expression** (Article 10) and **assembly** (Article 11) when defenders face restrictions or reprisals,
- **Right to private/family life** (Article 8) in cases of pollution or environmental degradation.

PROTESTS

Why and when do we protest?

We protest when injustice or crisis demands collective action to defend rights, justice, and our future.

Under international law, **States hold the primary responsibility to protect protesters** and to respect and facilitate the exercise of their rights (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 8). However, the Human Rights Committee has also made it clear that: "business enterprises have a responsibility to respect [...] the right of peaceful assembly of, for example, communities affected by their activities and of their employees. **Private entities and broader society may be expected to accept some level of disruption** as a result of the exercise of the right."

Also, according to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee, **penalisation, persecution or harassment** of members of the public seeking to exercise the right to protest violates article 3 (8) of the Convention.



SAFETY IN PROTESTS: JUDGING YOUR OWN RISK, PRIVILEGES, AND CAPABILITIES

Your safety and wellbeing are essential when engaging in activism. What feels safe or comfortable will vary for each person, depending on individual circumstances, experiences, and privileges - and that's totally valid!

- It is important to reflect on your **personal situation and acknowledge**: Some forms of activism may not be safe or accessible for you. For example, you may be at greater risk of police targeting due to your race, gender identity, disability, immigration status, or other factors. Protests, civil disobedience, or online activism may carry different levels of risk depending on who you are.

- Some forms of activism may be easier or safer for you because of your **privileges**. You might feel more comfortable attending demonstrations, speaking publicly, or taking visible leadership roles due to protections linked to your identity, legal status, financial position, or level of community support.



Please note: Not being able to engage in a certain type of activism doesn't make you less of an activist, and ensures that you are minimising the risks to yours.

SAFETY CHECKLIST

If you decide that attending a particular action or protest event feels safe and comfortable, it is important to prepare in advance. Key considerations include:

- **Be aware of the action programme:** Make sure you have key information shared by organisers, possible escalation/de-escalation plans, exit plans, etc. Organised actions usually have preparatory sessions and share information online, like in the A12 protests by Extinction Rebellion in the Netherlands.
- **Stay hydrated and nourished:** Bring plenty of water and snacks to prevent dehydration or fatigue, especially during long events or in hot weather.
- **Protect yourself from hazards:** Consider face coverings, goggles, or n95 masks in case of tear gas, smoke, or dust. Do not wear contact lenses.
- **Know your rights:** Familiarise yourself with local laws, protest regulations, and your rights in case of arrest, including the possibility of false arrest.
- **Protect digital privacy:** Use encrypted messaging apps, keep phones charged, and be mindful of what you post online before, during, and after the event.
- **Use the buddy system**: Pair up with someone to go through the action together.

- **Safety in numbers:** Attend events with friends, allies, or trusted groups whenever possible. Being part of a group can make you feel more confident and supported than when you are alone, but confidence can sometimes lead to taking greater risks: as the number of people in a protest shrinks, so does your feeling of safety. Stay alert, watch out for each other, and have a clear plan for communication and meeting points.
- **Plan for emergencies:** Share your location with a trusted contact, have a first aid kit or basic supplies, your ID and some cash with you, and know the nearest exits or safe areas.
- **Know what to do in case of arrest:** If your action puts you at risk of getting arrested, remember to collect useful information and contacts on paper. You can use the checklist at p. 22 and bring a 'bustcard' with you (see examples here).

Being prepared helps you stay safe, confident, and able to focus on your activism while minimising risks.



MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

It is also very important to **look after your mental health and wellbeing** when engaging in activism. This can include:

- Making sure that **you know why you are engaging** in a specific type of activity and **what emotions are driving you**.
- **Regular check-ins about your feelings**, both in terms of your cause and the activities you've been engaging in.
- **Building a supportive community** of likeminded individuals around you, who can support both your activism and wellbeing.
- **Seeking help**, whether that be counselling, education, or psychological support.
- **Taking a break** when necessary!





INJURIES & EMERGENCY RESPONSES

- **If exposed to tear gas, pepperspray, or rubber bullets:** Move to fresh air immediately. Do not rub your eyes. Rinse with clean water. Remove contact lenses if possible. Seek medic help if breathing problems persist.
- **If bleeding:** Apply firm pressure, elevate if possible, call emergency services.
- **Heatstroke and dehydration:** Rest in shade, drink water slowly, loosen clothing.
- **Head or trauma injuries** - monitor consciousness, call ambulance if confused, vomiting, or unconscious.
- **If detained or arrested:** Stay calm. Do not physically resist. Ask for a lawyer. Try to memorise or carry with you officer names, badge numbers, and events. If safe, have your buddy record details.

Lastly, don't forget that environmental defenders get prosecuted and even killed at an alarming rate worldwide. It is a privilege to be able to exercise your rights safely, and this will be different from country to country. Based on data from Global Witness, **196 environmental defenders were killed worldwide in 2023**, with South American countries topping the list.

ANTI-PROTEST LAWS & SLAPPS

Young environmental defenders across Europe often face **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**: legal actions aimed at discouraging public involvement. SLAPPs are used by corporations, conglomerates, developers or powerful actors to silence, intimidate and harass defenders.

For example

A 19-year-old campaigner from southern Italy who spoke out about illegal waste dumping was accused of "damaging the company's reputation" after she posted photos of polluted land near their site and called for stronger inspections. She was demanded a public apology and compensation she could never afford, and warned that a full lawsuit would follow if she continued. At first, she was frightened and stopped attending protests while she and her family tried to understand the legal paperwork. But with support from a local NGO offering legal guidance and public attention growing, the company quietly withdrew its threat. While she was ultimately able to continue her work, this experience showed how these actions can **intimidate young people and make them question whether speaking up for the environment is worth the personal risk.**

These lawsuits are not meant to address wrongdoing or to win in court, but **to intimidate, drain activists' resources and discourage public participation**. This is particularly common in cases where activists expose deforestation, pollution or other corporate misconduct causing environmental harm.

SLAPPs have received severe backlash from human rights groups and organisations stating they **restrict the ability for citizens to exercise their democratic rights**. In Europe, the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) has created a **detailed handbook on addressing SLAPPS**.

How to respond:

1. *Recognise warning signs:* If a lawsuit appears slanderous, disproportionate, or clearly punitive, it may be a SLAPP.
2. *Seek legal support:* Contact NGOs, pro-bono lawyers, or anti-SLAPP legal networks for guidance.
3. *Document everything:* Keep detailed records of your activism, communications, and any threats.
4. *Use legal protections:* The EU Anti-SLAPP Directive (2024) empowers courts to dismiss abusive cases early in the process, protecting activists from harassment.



Tip: Early recognition and support can prevent a SLAPP from draining your resources and keep your advocacy effective.

Outside of the EU:
The recognition of SLAPPs is specific to the European Union, however there are other forms of anti-protest laws across the rest of Europe.

An example of this is the **Public Order Act 2023** in the United Kingdom, which gave law enforcement authorities greater powers to prevent protest tactics deemed 'disruptive'. A lot of these tactics are used by climate activists.

Against these laws, artt. 10 (freedom of expression) and 11 (freedom of assembly and association) of the European Convention of Human Rights could be invoked in Council of Europe Member States.

Further Resources on SLAPPs:
How to stop SLAPPs – the intentional silencing of critical voices - European Centre for Press and Media Freedom



#PROTECT & ACT FOR YOUR RIGHTS



DIGITAL ACTIVISM

#HOW TO MAKE POSTS THAT ATTRACT PEOPLE

- Using colours that catch people's eyes
- Using fonts that are readable but fun
- Using trends (e.g., memes, TikTok dances, viral hashtags, etc.)
- Differentiating your campaign from others - be original, tell your story, maybe add a GIF or two... but only if it helps get your point across your target audience.



#HAVING A STRONG SLOGAN

Something short that people can remember (examples like "My Voice My Choice" and "HeForShe" Campaign)

#MAKING VIDEO MATERIAL

- Behind-the-scenes glimpses (preparing to go to protests, preparing things like signs)
- Selecting the right social media platforms (instead of being on every platform, focus on one and make it as good as possible)
- It's important to not only highlight the problems and the negatives but also highlighting the possible solutions and positives

#PLATFORMS FOR DIGITAL ADVOCACY SKILLS

- Database of free and paid trainings: Social Movement Technologies Global Community
- Free resources and events: Access Now

#MORE TIPS FOR ADVOCACY & VISIBILITY

1. Media: Local press, environmental journalists, international outlets (e.g. The Guardian environment desk)

2. EU & UN contacts: Petitions to European Parliament, reports to UN Special Rapporteurs.

3. Alliances: Build coalitions with climate youth groups, unions, or community local organisations.

COLLECTING

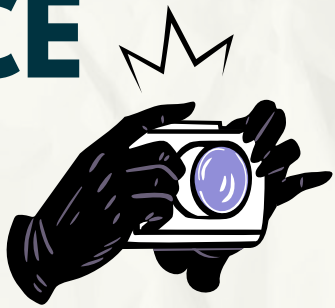
Why Collect Evidence

Collecting evidence helps you protect yourself and show what really happened. Photos, videos, notes, and recordings can be useful if authorities, lawyers, or journalists get involved. Being prepared ahead of time makes it easier to stay safe and keep your story accurate.

What Counts as Useful Evidence

- Photos & videos: of events, people, and property damage.
- Notes: write down what happened, when, where, and who was involved.
- Voice recordings: your account or eyewitness statements.
- Physical evidence: clothing or things showing harm or chemical exposure.
- Medical proof: pictures of injuries, reports, or hospital records.

EVIDENCE



How to Collect Evidence Safely

The device in your pocket can give off information that could be used to identify you. So you need to be careful what phone, or if any at all, you bring with you:

- Bring a burner phone or one you don't use often.
- Use a small camera if possible.
- Carry a notepad and pen for notes.
- Use a voice recorder for quick audio accounts.

What to Capture

- Plan ahead: know what to record and how.
- Spot the gear: notice police or authority equipment (batons, shields, bodycams).
- Faces & badges: take photos or videos of officers' identifying features.
- Document events: record incidents, misconduct, or injuries.
- Keep a timeline: when and where things happened, and what you were doing.
- Describe injuries: size, location, type, and how they affect you.
- Protect the evidence:
  - Don't narrate over videos.
  - Don't show or name other protesters.
  - Keep clothes with chemical or physical residue safe.



After the Event

- Take photos of injuries or leftover evidence in natural light (full body + close-ups).
- Don’t edit your photos or videos.
- Make backups on different devices or cloud storage.
- Organise evidence in envelopes or bags, with dates and short notes.

Writing Your Story

- Write down everything you remember: what, when, where, how, and who.
- Record your day chronologically: your location, what happened, and your actions.
- Include detailed injury info: size, position, how it affects you.
- You can record a voice note and transcribe it later.
- Ask a trusted friend to help write or confirm your story.



CALLING OUT ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ABUSES

LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

- Local Authorities or your Relevant National Ombudsman – File complaints with municipal or regional environmental agencies.
- Environment Ministry or Agency – Each EU country has a governmental authority responsible for environmental protection.
- National Courts – Environmental rights can often be enforced through administrative or constitutional courts.
- Members of your National Parliament

#EU MECHANISMS

- European Commission (DG Environment) – Submit a complaint if a Member State fails to comply with EU environmental law.
- European Parliament Petitions Committee – Any EU citizen can petition on environmental rights violations.
- European Environment Agency (EEA) – Provides evidence/data but not a complaint mechanism.

#COUNCIL OF EUROPE (HUMAN RIGHTS)

- European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) – **Report environmental abuses** linked to rights (health, life, private/family life,freedom of expression).
- European Committee of Social Rights – Handles collective complaints under the European Social Charter.
- Also take a look on our position paper on further protections we want the CoE to provide for environmental defenders, such as recognition of the RTHE and introduction of monitoring tools.

#INTERNATIONAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY ROUTES

- Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee – For violations of access to information, public participation, and justice in environmental matters.
- UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment – Can receive submissions on serious abuses.
- NGOs / Legal Networks – E.g ClientEarth, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth Europe, Justice & Environment network.

#CHECKLIST
IN CASE OF ARREST

Trusted Contacts:

- Keep the numbers of family members, close friends, and possibly a lawyer.
- Keep all contacts written on paper.
- Share this guide with a trusted friend in advance.

Do not speak without a lawyer

- You have the right to a lawyer - Do not speak to authorities without your lawyer present. You can say “no comment”.
- Remember that in some jurisdictions police are allowed to lie to you. Some previous research on this aspect might help you!

Call a lawyer or trusted person

- You are entitled to one phone call – to a lawyer or a trusted family member.
- If you do not have a trusted person to contact, make sure you keep the contacts of NGOs providing pro-bono legal support.

Spread the word:

- Reach out to reporters & journalists to document your case if something serious happens.
- Contact official channels of protests and movements to spread urgent information with the activist community.

Seek Medical Support:

- Request medical support if necessary.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

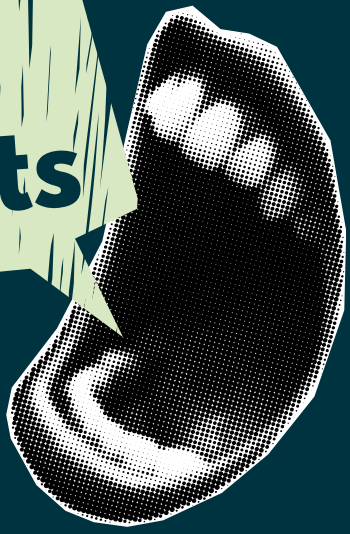
Useful contacts

- Steering Committee for Human Rights of the Council of Europe:
  - **dgi-cddh@coe.int**
  - **dgi-cddh-reform@coe.int**
  - **cddh-46plus1@coe.int**
- Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention: **aarhus-envdefenders@un.org**

Resources

- **Guidelines on the Right to Peaceful Environmental Protest and Civil Disobedience** by the UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention
- **Protecting Ourselves - Protest Safely** by Amnesty International
- **How to prevent SLAPPs or get help if it's too late** by CASE
- **How to stop SLAPPs – the intentional silencing of critical voices** by ECPMF

#know your rights



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