

# ACCESS TO

# ENVIRONMENTAL

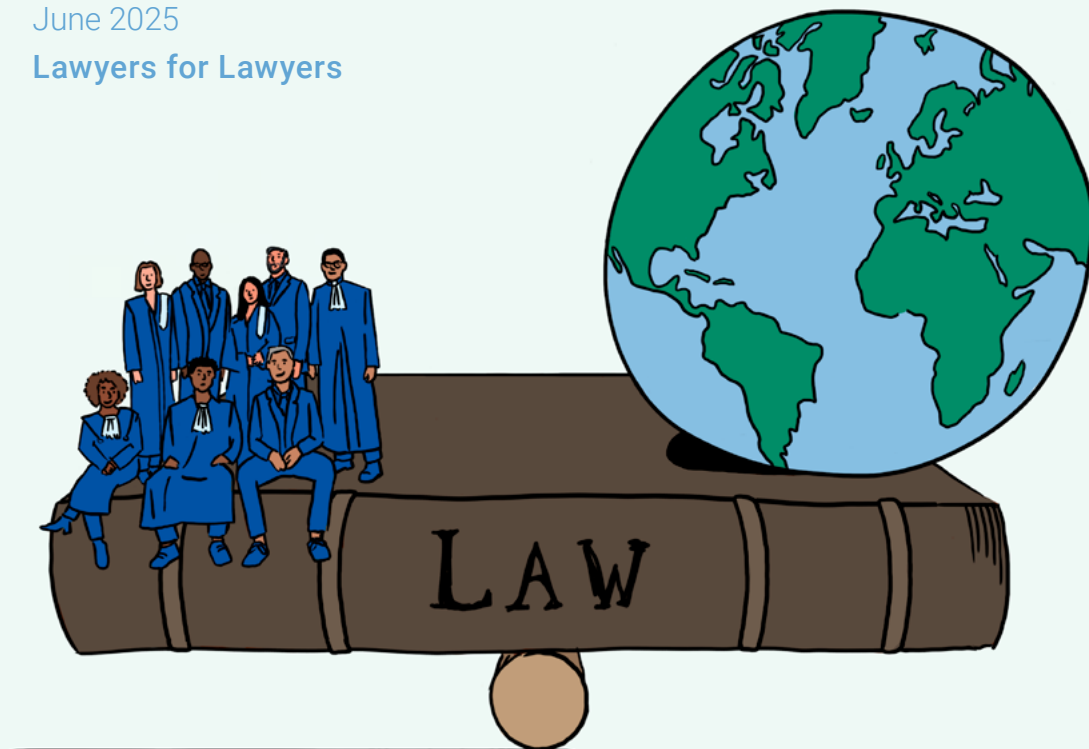
# JUSTICE UNDER THREAT

The Role, Risks, and Rights of Environmental Lawyers

Executive summary & recommendations

June 2025

Lawyers for Lawyers



LAWYERS  
FOR  
LAWYERS

## About the Author

Lawyers for Lawyers is an independent and non-political foundation that seeks to promote the proper functioning of the rule of law by pursuing freedom and independence of the legal profession. Lawyers for Lawyers supports lawyers worldwide who face reprisals, improper interference, or unreasonable restrictions in the execution of their profession. Lawyers for Lawyers was granted Special Consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2013.

## About the Report

This report forms part of the Environmental Lawyers Campaign launched in May 2022 to raise awareness about the challenges faced by environmental lawyers worldwide. Notwithstanding the many studies which rightly focus on the aggregate of “environmental defenders”, this report aims to highlight the specific role environmental lawyers play in providing access to justice in environmental matters, the unique risks they face for carrying out this work, and the need to advocate for their enhanced protection. The report addresses these topics and gives voice to the experiences of environmental lawyers from across the world. When lawyers are harassed, intimidated, or obstructed in retaliation for their work, it undermines the effective administration of justice and the rule of law. As a result, the human rights of both lawyers and their clients who try to defend the environment are at risk, as well as nature itself.

This report and the conclusions therein are authored by Lawyers for Lawyers and do not necessarily mirror the views of the individuals and organisations who were consulted.

## Acknowledgements

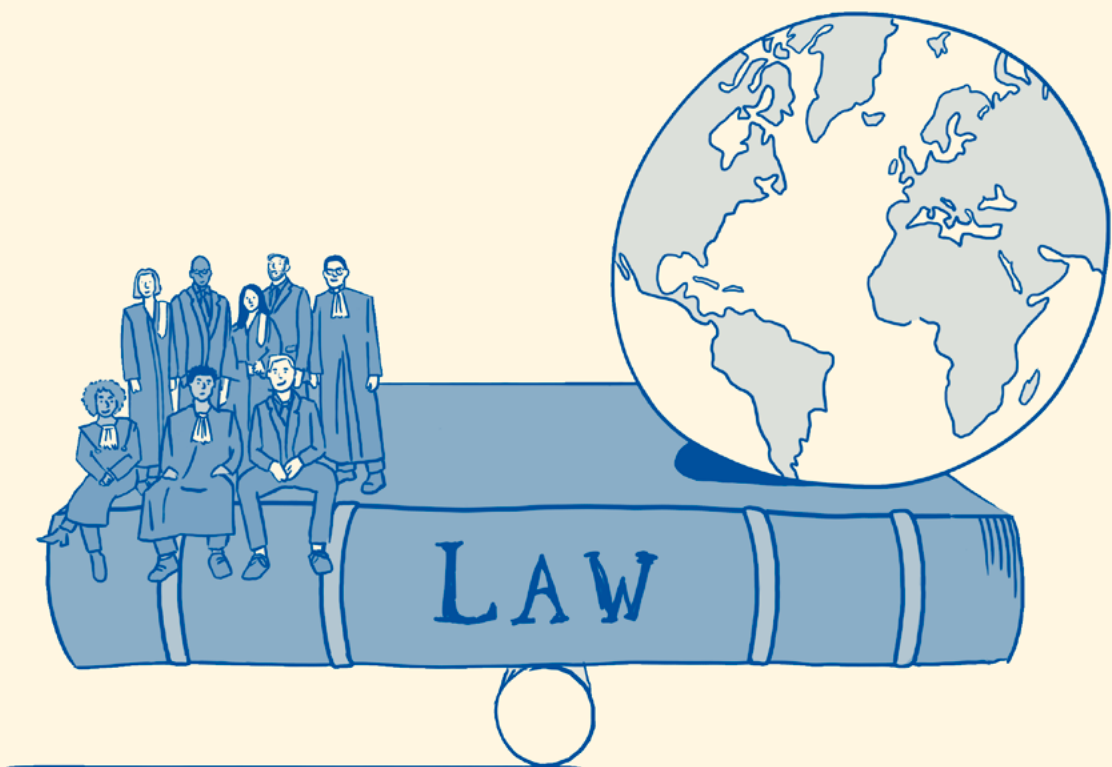
Lawyers for Lawyers thanks all the environmental lawyers and stakeholders who shared their time and insights, without whom we could not have achieved the same level of depth. We are grateful to the former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, Mr. John Knox, for serving as our second reader and offering his valuable insights, as well as other experts who were consulted and provided feedback throughout the process.

Special thanks are extended to the environmental lawyers who were interviewed and featured in this report and to those who have chosen to remain anonymous for security reasons.

Lay-out and design: Harma Makken

Illustrations: Eva ten Have

Portraits: Joost Hölscher



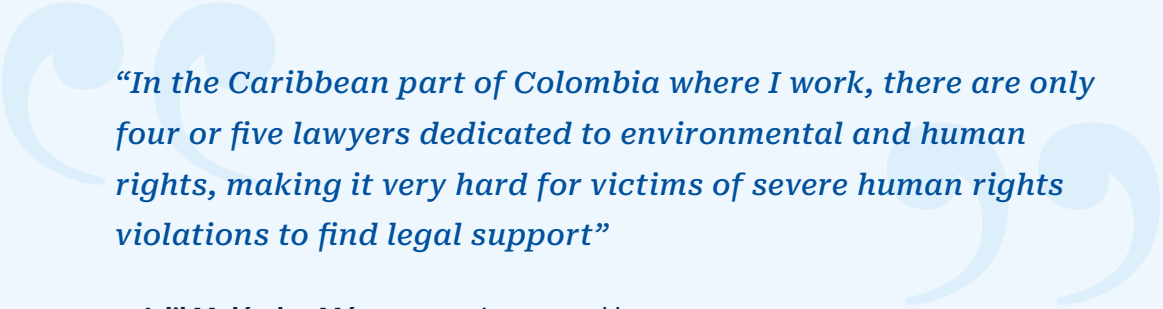
## Executive Summary

Environmental lawyers play a pivotal role in ensuring access to climate justice and defending the rights of communities facing environmental harm. Yet across the globe, these lawyers are increasingly subjected to threats, harassment, and undue interference. In response to this trend, Lawyers for Lawyers launched a campaign in 2022 (the “Environmental Lawyers Campaign”) to raise awareness about their plight. The present report is a result of that campaign and ongoing documentation efforts.

Grounded in the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, the report draws on 25 in-depth interviews conducted with environmental lawyers across all continents between May 2022 and October 2024. It identifies widespread and growing threats of physical, legal, reputational, and digital nature that not only undermine the safety and independence of environmental lawyers but also the rights and livelihoods of the communities they serve. As a result, the human rights of both lawyers and their clients who seek to defend the environment are at risk – along with nature itself.

**Environmental lawyers are central to upholding the rule of law and ensuring access to climate justice,** particularly for marginalised communities disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation. Their work goes far beyond litigation: they empower communities through education and training, help monitor environmental harms, and facilitate access to remedies while holding powerful actors to account. Often working in remote, hazardous areas, they build trust with clients – many of whom are Indigenous Peoples, farmers, or grassroots activists – in order to effectively challenge harmful projects. Some lawyers are themselves members of marginalised groups and serve as a critical bridge between communities and the justice system, translating grievances into legal claims.

Despite the growing need for their services, environmental lawyers are both vastly under-resourced and alarmingly low in number. In several countries, entire regions rely on the efforts of just a handful of practitioners. This shortage is not accidental: their job comes with increased risk, as lawyers face physical attacks, harassment, and intimidation from both state and non-state actors. These tactics not only obstruct their ability to work effectively but also create a chilling effect that deters new lawyers from entering the field.



*“In the Caribbean part of Colombia where I work, there are only four or five lawyers dedicated to environmental and human rights, making it very hard for victims of severe human rights violations to find legal support”*

– **Adil Meléndez Márquez**, environmental lawyer

The report identifies a rise in threats and attacks against environmental lawyers in retaliation for their legal work. They include the following trends:

- **Stigmatisation:** Lawyers are frequently vilified as “anti-development” or “enemies of the State” due to the nature of their clients or causes. This mischaracterization erodes their credibility, encourages self-censorship, and isolates them socially and professionally.
- **Physical attacks and intimidation:** More than half of the interviewees reported experiencing physical threats, including kidnapping and assault. These attacks often follow periods of public defamation and are perpetrated by both State and non-State actors.
- **Legal harassment:** Environmental lawyers face SLAPP suits, arbitrary arrests, and baseless prosecutions, which not only drain limited resources but also discourage legal advocacy. Several environmental lawyers are currently imprisoned as a direct consequence of their legal work.
- **Barriers to information and due process:** Lawyers report systematic obstructions in accessing essential documents, such as Environmental Impact Assessments, undermining their ability to mount effective legal challenges in violation of the principle of equality of arms.
- **Surveillance and breaches of confidentiality:** One-third of the lawyers interviewed expressed concerns about surveillance. Arbitrary monitoring activities and the seizure of documents and devices compromise lawyer-client confidentiality and create a chilling effect on legal advocacy.

The right to access justice, including an effective remedy for environmental harms, fundamentally depends on the right to independent legal counsel. International and regional legal standards have long recognised the centrality the legal profession to the rule of law and protection of human rights. As such, lawyers are awarded a unique set of professional obligations and rights to fulfil their role. States have both negative and positive obligations to ensure environmental lawyers can perform this role effectively - free from undue interference, harassment, or intimidation. In addition, professional lawyers’ associations must protect the profession’s independence, by defending colleagues against improper restrictions, and promoting the role of lawyers in a democratic society. This follows from both the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers as well as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Without respect for the role of environmental lawyers and the protection of their rights, meaningful legal redress for environmental harm is severely undermined. This jeopardises global sustainability and human rights objectives, including those enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Lawyers for Lawyers calls on States to implement legal and practical measures to ensure the independence, safety, and protection of environmental lawyers. This includes access to essential information, respect for lawyer-client confidentiality, effective investigation of threats and attacks, and the establishment of protection programs in consultation with those affected. Professional associations of lawyers, international organisations such as the UNEP and UNDP, and other UN human rights bodies should similarly recognise and actively promote the vital role of environmental lawyers, raise awareness about the risks they face, and advocate for their enhanced protection.

## Recommendations to States

- States should take immediate measures to ensure sufficient safeguards are in place, both in law and in practice, to guarantee the full independence and safety of environmental lawyers and their effective protection against any form of harassment in connection with their professional activities, both in their capacity as lawyers as well as human rights defenders.
- States should take measures to guarantee environmental lawyers' access to appropriate information, files, and documents, including environmental impact assessment construed in line with international human rights standards necessary to provide effective legal services. In this context, States should consider adopting specific legislation on the right to information in the environmental sphere.
- States should take measures to ensure that lawyer-client confidentiality and right to privacy are respected, ceasing any type of unlawful surveillance, or searches and seizures of their premises, and ensure special safeguards against any infringements of lawyer-client confidentiality.
- States should promptly investigate and prosecute crimes committed against environmental lawyers by State and non-State actors, as well as any other instances of harassment, threats, or intimidation, in line with internationally recognised standards.
- States should establish targeted and accessible protection programs to ensure the safety of environmental lawyers and their families, including provisions for easily accessible emergency funding. These programs should be developed in consultation with the environmental lawyers themselves.
- States should take immediate action to engage and raise awareness within the private sector regarding their crucial role and responsibilities concerning environmental lawyers. It is imperative to develop and enact appropriate legislation that ensures private sector compliance with these responsibilities. This legislation should be robust and comprehensive, aiming to safeguard the vital role of environmental lawyers and uphold environmental justice standards. Governments must lead efforts to foster understanding and accountability among private entities, ensuring they contribute positively to environmental protection efforts in accordance with established legal frameworks.
- States should take anti-SLAPP measures, including the adoption of anti-SLAPP legislation, in order to ensure an early dismissal of SLAPP suits and the imposition of sanctions on those initiating them, in order to guarantee that environmental lawyers are able to actively engage in public participation.
- States, together with professional associations of lawyers should actively raise awareness and unequivocally support the critical role of environmental lawyers in delivering legal services, advancing environmental justice, and protecting human rights.

## Recommendations to professional associations of lawyers

- Professional associations of lawyers should have a designated contact point or reporting procedure, established in accordance with objective criteria and maintained by confidentiality, through which environmental lawyers can report instances of interference of harassment with their professional activities.
- Professional associations of lawyers should take immediate measures in response to any form of harassment of environmental lawyers by both States and non-State actors to guarantee that lawyers can effectively carry out their professional functions.
- Professional associations of lawyers should take a proactive stance in promoting the work of environmental lawyers and contribute to awareness campaigns on the risks and challenges they face, as well as the opportunities for recourse and support available.
- National and international unions of professional associations should convene meetings, in the form of a conference, expert groups or ongoing dialogues, to discuss the experiences of environmental lawyers and build capacity to receive and consider claims of violations of their rights.

## Recommendations to international organisations

- The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) should strengthen their efforts to raise awareness about the plight of environmental lawyers, support their work in collaboration with international and local NGOs, and build the capacity of governments to understand and comply with their human rights obligations relating to environmental lawyers' rights and the right to access to environmental justice.
- The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) should acknowledge the contribution of environmental lawyers to the SDGs (13, 16, among others) and support their cause by urging governments to sign and ratify the Aarhus Convention and ensure its effective implementation.
- The UN Human Rights Council should call on State Parties to guarantee that environmental lawyers can fulfil their professional duties free from improper interference, harassment, or intimidation, and that any crimes or violations committed against them are promptly and effectively investigated and prosecuted.
- The UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights defenders, on the independence of judges and lawyers, on human rights in the context of climate change, and on the protection of environmental defenders should raise the profile of environmental lawyers and acknowledge their vital role in providing access to environmental justice, as well as their contribution to the SDGs (13, 16, among others) to counter harmful narratives that undermine their work and enhance their protection.
- Regional human rights institutions in Africa and ASEAN should establish protective mechanisms, like those of the Inter-American human rights system, to provide emergency protection to environmental human rights defenders, including environmental lawyers.





Verónica  
Guerrero

*in memoriam*



**Lawyers for Lawyers**

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[info@lawyersforlawyers.nl](mailto:info@lawyersforlawyers.nl)

[www.lawyersforlawyers.org](http://www.lawyersforlawyers.org)