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“Environmental defenders”: the power / disempowerment of a loaded term

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the terms “environmental defenders”, “land defenders” and “environmental human rights defenders” have gained currency among NGOs, media and UN agencies. This has coincided with the development of an international infrastructure encompassing prizes, resolutions and resources to support and acknowledge defenders and their causes. However, the uptake of the term “environmental defenders” and related notions has been uneven across geographical areas, languages and those considered defenders. Listening to the voices of this last group themselves, this chapter considers two questions. First, it explores the connotations of the term “environmental defenders” and examines to what extent it corresponds to the ways those labelled in this way see and identify themselves and their work. Second, it looks at the ways in which the term empowers or, by contrast, disempowers, and the various advantages and drawbacks related to its use. We conclude by considering a number of ways in which those supporting or reporting on defenders can mitigate the inadvertent negative effects of the term, to which so far no alternative has emerged that is less contentious or better captures the heterogeneous groups that it designates.

Keywords: environmental defenders; environmental human rights defenders; human rights; NGOs.

Introduction

“Environmental defenders”, also called “environmental and land defenders” or “environmental human rights defenders (EHRD)” are recent terms for an old phenomenon: people fighting to protect themselves, their community, their land, and ecosystems against a range of threats, including dispossession, pollution, and unsustainable resource use. In many cases, these threats stem from extractive industries, agro-businesses and large-scale infrastructure and energy projects. The term “environmental and land defenders” was initially used to describe environmentalists and lawyers fighting destructive projects through US courts in the 1970s (Anderson & Rosencranz, 1975; Wandesforde-Smith, 1974). In the 2000s, the terms gained currency within the United Nations (UN) human rights apparatus. In this context, environmental and land defenders were considered a subset of human rights

defenders working on economic, social and cultural rights (Forst, 2014; Knox, 2017). In parallel, the designation "environmental (human rights and/or land) defenders" and related subject matter have increasingly been taken up by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (e.g., Global Witness, 2012), journalists (e.g., Watts & Vidal, 2017), and a rapidly growing number of academics (Butt et al., 2019; Middeldorp & Le Billon, 2019; Le Billon & Lujala, 2020; Rasch, 2017; Scheidel et al., 2020).

The institutionalization of the designation "environmental (human rights) and land defenders" has gone hand in hand with the development of an international infrastructure to support at-risk defenders. In 2018, UN Environment adopted a policy on "Promoting Greater Protection for Environmental Defenders" (UNEP, 2018), and in 2019 the UN Human Rights Council unanimously passed a resolution on "Recognizing the Contribution of Environmental Human Rights Defenders"[1]. In Latin America, the Escazú Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, adopted on 4 March 2018, sets out the requirement that states protect human rights defenders engaged in protecting the environment.[2] Furthermore, numerous NGOs, such as Not1More and those united in the Defending Land and Environmental Defenders Coalition assist defenders, for instance, through judicial assistance, helping them stay under cover or building their protection skills. NGOs also engage in raising awareness about defenders at risk, including by keeping tallies of killed defenders (see e.g., Global Witness, 2020) and reaching out to media outlets.

Many of these NGOs are based in the Global North, while the majority of the defenders they help are based in the Global South. This raises the question whether the term "environmental /land defenders" is not more a construct developed in the North to categorize people and actions in the South without this corresponding to their own views and discourses. What do those engaged in fighting socio-environmental injustices themselves think of the term "environmental defenders"? Is this a term they identify with and that accurately reflects their own sense of belonging and of what they do? Or is this more an outside categorization that does not correspond to how they designate themselves and their struggles? Relatedly, to what extent does the term, and the infrastructure that has emerged around it, help those labelled defenders and advance their struggles? Are there also certain dangers related to being identified or self-labelling as "environmental/land defenders"?

This contribution addresses these questions by drawing on our field research on those considered "defenders" in a number of different settings, including Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Colombia, Guinea-Bissau, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ecuador, and the UK. Even though they often do not use the label themselves, we will simply call

[1] Human Rights Council 40th session, February 2019, RES/40/11, Recognizing the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development, see https://www.right-docs.org/doc/a-hrc-res-40-11/ [accessed 11 December 2020]
[2] Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/4/S1800428_en.pdf [accessed 11 December 2020]

them “defenders” herein, given that it has proven difficult to find a single uncontested term that accurately captures this heterogeneous group. We do not aim to provide definite answers to the questions raised above–which would require more systematic research– but intend to share initial observations to provoke further discussion. Moreover, our observations are limited to our own research sites: we cannot speak for those considered defenders in other contexts.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. The first part reflects on why the term “environmental defenders” is loaded and unevenly used. We then turn to the perspectives of defenders themselves. The next section looks at the extent to which the use of the term “environmental defenders” has helped or hindered struggles for socio-environmental justice. We conclude by reflecting on the practical implications of our findings.

The uneven geographies of a loaded term

Words are not neutral tools of speech: they always carry particular meanings and values. Through its second component, the term “environmental defenders” resembles “human rights defenders”. As such, it is inscribed in the logic and language of human rights. This is even stronger the case with the term “environmental human rights defenders”. The human rights project has its origins in the European Enlightenment. Among the many criticisms levied against this project are its universalizing tendencies, its Eurocentrism and its origins in liberal individualism (Baxi, 2007; Douzinas, 2000). The notion “environmental defenders” carries some of this baggage too. It directs attention to certain individuals, who are singled out for their activism, rather than seeing this activism as a product of collectives as a whole. In addition, it tries to place a heterogeneous group within a single category, assuming that the corresponding label is adequate across regions and cultures. Despite this baggage, the discourse of human rights has also been acknowledged to have worldwide emancipatory potential. In addition, it has been a source of hope and aspirations for a better future (Sikkink, 2017). Moreover, there are growing efforts to “decolonize” the human rights project and construct a counter-hegemonic theory and practice of human rights (Barreto, 2013). Environmental defenders’ association with human rights is therefore a mixed blessing.

The first component of the term, “environmental”, which is sometimes complemented by “land”, also has particular connotations. It is grounded in the idea of the environment as a notion that is clearly separate from “society”, which reflects a particular (western) worldview (Descola & Pálsson, 1996). In addition, it suggests that those labelled “environmental or land defenders” fight primarily for the environment and/or their land. However, the “right to a clean and healthy environment” as established in international law has a relatively narrow and anthropocentric remit (Attapatu, 2002). Indeed, those protecting particular rivers, mountains, rock formations, trees or lands may be more motivated by the spiritual value these entities hold, or the inherent value they have, than by

the desire to have a clean environment (for humans) per se. Furthermore, defenders may strive predominantly to preserve their lifeworld (of which the environment is only one part) or their livelihoods (which may depend on a clean environment, or "intact" nature, but also on "resources" such as wildlife). As stated by Martínez-Alier (2014, p. 240):

> The thesis of the 'environmentalism of the poor'' does not assert that as a rule poor people feel, think and behave as environmentalists. This is not so. The thesis is that in the many resource extraction and waste disposal conflicts in history and today, the poor are often on the side of the preservation of nature against business firms and the state. This behaviour is consistent with their interests and with their values.

Other defenders may aim more for the protection of nature, ecosystems, biodiversity, animal rights or earth itself rather than "the environment". For many forest communities, for instance, the forest constitutes their entire world, implying they see no ontological difference between the forest and the world. Therefore, they fight to preserve the world at large, not "their" or "the" environment. For these reasons, the designation "environment" may not always accurately represent activists' objectives, motivations and identification.

In sum, as with most categorizations, the term "environmental defenders" is loaded and contested, as it homogenizes a diverse set of actors and their projects. Yet it is unclear to what extent and how this has affected its uptake among those considered defenders themselves as well as among other groups. There appear to be great variations in the use of the term "environmental defenders" per (language) area, as reflected in a simple Google search.[3] The term "environmental defenders" in English yields 205,000 results, compared to 13, 8 million for the term "environmentalist". The French "défenseurs de l'environnement"– which signifies environmentalists and nature conservationists in general– has 469,000 results, while only 3,3% of Internet users are primarily Francophone.[4] The Spanish "defensores del ambiente" and "defensores del medioambiente" yield 290,000 and 297,000 results, respectively, with Spanish speakers representing 7.9% of internet users. Finally, the Portuguese "defensores ambientais" gives just 13,700 results, with Portuguese speakers constituting 3.3% of global internet users. For the English and Portuguese terms, the first entries include UN Environment, Global Witness and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, while for the Spanish "defensores del medio ambiente", Protection International and Human Rights Watch are among the first entries. This illustrates how the term is mostly used in UN and NGO circles.

Aside from being used unevenly in different languages, the term "environmental defenders" is not equally used across the Global North and the Global South. While the French term is commonly also employed to designate defenders, environmentalists and conservationists in Francophone countries in the Global North, it is rarely used in

[3] The Google search for all terms listed was conducted on 11 December 2020.
[4] Figures derived from Internet World Stats, 'Internet World Users by Language', https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm [accessed 10 December 2020].

Francophone countries in Africa. For instance, fieldwork in the DRC learned that most activists speaking French were either unfamiliar with the term, or simply did not use it. Contrary to the French term, the English "environmental defenders" is rarely used to describe people in the Global North. A more common designation for this group is "environmental activist", which yields 2,240,000 results on Google. These disparities raise the question where and by who the term "environmental defenders" is taken up and when not? To answer these questions, we must listen to those labelled defenders themselves.

Perspectives of defenders

In contexts where the term "environmental (human rights)/land defenders" and its various translations are not often used, we see a plethora of other terms in use. For instance, our fieldwork in Ecuador shows that other Spanish terms circulate among urban activists and the media, such as "life defenders", "nature defenders" or "ecologists". Ecuador was the first country to enshrine the Rights of (mother) nature in its constitution, which were inaccurately translated as *Pachamama* in the indigenous language Kichwa. This term has generated much debate, since reducing a notion with a broad meaning in Andean-Amazonian philosophy to a narrow understanding of "nature". The designation of environmental defenders has similarly generated vivid debate. After a harsh confrontation with defenders, President Rafael Correa introduced the pejorative term "*ecologistas infantiles*" (childish ecologists) for activists struggling against extractive industries–a term that gained traction in pro-extractivist circles.

The activists we interviewed identified with the term defenders only partially. For example, one activist whose brother was killed in 2002 for organizing communities against oil extraction in the Amazon told us: "I prefer the term fighter (*luchador*)". He further explained: "We fight for life, because we do not want the planet to be stained as it is stained" (Personal interview, August 2019). Another interviewee, who was a colleague of the murdered activist, described himself as a "*defensor de derechos humanos y ambientales*" (defender of human and environmental rights). He is a self-taught lawyer and coordinates the *Oficina de derecho ambiental* (Office of Environmental Law), where they give legal advice and representation to peasants and farmers affected by the oil industry. However, he also identifies as an "*ambientalista*" (environmentalist) (Personal interview, August 2019).

Among indigenous activists in Ecuador, the term "territory" often arises. As one of them explained:

> Here we are defending the territory, more than anything we are all conservationists of ecology (*conservadores de la ecología*). We are defending our territory for our children. Because later, when the mining company enters, it will totally destroy our

> territory. So we don't want that, we defend our territory for the good of our children and for the entire good of the Ecuadorian country. (Personal interview, May 2019).

Some also affirm their ethnic identity associated with what can be seen as an "environmental vocation":

> We are Shuar. We are *conservadores y nativos de aquí* (conservationists and native from here), we do not cut the trees. [...] I was born here, my father was born here, may he rest in peace. That is why we do not want contamination, because if the mining company will be established, it is very polluting, all practices of the company. (Personal interview, May 2019).

We may also consider that in this particular context, the community has been subject to military violence, hence the term "defender" may be associated with "defence" against a peril (of being subject to that kind of violence again).

In Cambodia, interviewees gave a wide variety of responses to the question of how they would describe themselves. Some would label themselves simply as "a member of the community", a "human rights defender", or "one of the people". In certain contexts, the term "land defender" resonated more than "environmental defender". In the DRC, the term "community" (*lisanga* in Lingala; *communauté* in French) also figured prominently in how defenders described themselves, especially when they were customary chiefs. When asked how he identified, a chief engaged in a struggle against an industrial logging company answered: "I am the leader of the community. Our aim is to protect tomorrow's life, to prepare the future of our children. The forest is something to look after". (Personal interview, May 2018). Another local leader, fighting against an industrial palm oil company, said:

> I consider myself a community leader. I am afraid that they [palm oil company] will take away the little bit of land that remains. If they also take that away, I cannot but cry. If we had not resisted the company would have taken it all. And if I die, my children will continue to cry. It's better to die than to live with these stupidities. That's why I fight, so that it does not happen to me while I live. (Personal interview, May 2018).

In the UK, research into violence against "environmental defenders" reveals that the term is not generally used. The more commonly used term is rather "environmental activists". Moreover, people engaged in environmental movements, especially in direct action, often call themselves "protectors" (Brock, 2020). This is particularly established in the anti-fracking movement, and contrasts with the labels "protestors" and "activists". This last term has negative connotations, notably in official statements and anti-terrorism policies set out by the State. Guidance on policing anti-fracking protests issued in 2015 by the National

Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) contained a diagram on the "structure of protest" that defined "activism" as involving criminality (criminal damage) and that saw it as the last stage before "extremism" (Jackson, Gilmore & Monk, 2019). In 2020, counter-terrorism police in the South-East listed Extinction Rebellion, a movement encouraging civil disobedience to put pressure on governments to take action on climate change, as an "extremist" group, stating that "an anti-establishment philosophy that seeks system change underlies its activism" (BBC, 2020).] By labelling themselves "protectors", those involved in protest are able to counter the negative narratives that accompany the idea of "environmental activists", and to emphasise the motivation and purpose of their actions, related to protecting land, ecosystems and the environment. Moreover, in certain contexts the term "protector" may highlight how they protect one another against police violence (Jackson, Monk & Gilmore, 2016).

In Brazil, the term "*defensores ambientais*" gained much attention after its use in UN Environment and Global Witness reports, which pointed to Brazil as the most violent country in the world for defenders. These reports considered a wide range of disparate groups as "environmental defenders", including all rural workers, peasant union leaders, indigenous leaders, rubber tappers, members of the *Movimento dos trabalhadores sem terra* (MST, Landless Workers' Movement), traditional populations and community leaders in forest areas. These groups indeed constitute the largest share of the victims of violence from landlords and others, as tallied year by year by reports of the *Comissão pastoral da terra* (CPT, Pastoral Land Commission), which supports small farmers and the landless. However, in many cases they do not consider themselves "environmental defenders".

Rural social movements rather use the terms "grassroots environmentalist" (*ambientalista popular*) or "communitarian environmentalist". These terms were introduced by professor Moacir Gadotti, one of the founders of "ecopedagogy" and a follower of Paulo Freire, the author of the seminal *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970[1968]). Ecopedagogy aims to develop forms of critical ecoliteracy and knowledge grounded in sustainability, biophilia and planetarity (Kahn, 2010). For instance, Zé Claudio and Maria, collectors of nuts in the Amazon who were assassinated by gunmen hired by ranchers, used to designate themselves as "*ambientalistas populares*". They would defend life together with the forest Milanez, 2020). Zé Claudio once said at a TEDx conference: "I live from the forest. I will protect her by any means. For this, I live with a bullet in my head at any time." [5]The United Nations honoured them in 2012 in memoriam as "Forest Heroes" [6]— a designation preceding that of Forest Defender.

Indigenous peoples and other "traditional populations" in Brazil often prefer to use the term "defenders of life", with life seen in a broader sense. Since the killing of the famous rubber tapper leader Chico Mendes, indigenous peoples have incorporated the fight for the

[5] See, 'Killing trees is murder: Zé Cláudio Ribeiro at TEDxAmazonia', November 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO2pwnrji8I [accessed 14 December 2020]
[6] See 'Forest Heroes - Jose Claudio Ribeiro and Maria do Espirito Santo, Special Award', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ5NH3-sFkY [accessed 14 December 2020]

environment as a struggle against dispossession. This shows again the multifaceted nature of the struggles of those labelled "defenders", and how these are not adequately captured by the term "environmental defender".

Enabling or endangering struggles?

Just as terms are never neutral, they are also never "mere words"; they have– sometimes profound–social and political effects. Here we consider four ways in which the term "environmental (and land) defender" affects socio-environmental struggles, whether helping or hindering them; 1) legitimizing and delegitimizing particular struggles, movements, actors and actions; 2) the martyrization of defenders, which may raise the visibility of their cause but also puts them at increased risk ; 3) individualization, which on the one hand eases access to international support networks; but on the other hand endangers defenders by creating individual responsibility and alienating them from communities that can provide them with crucial support; and 4) political ostracization, due to placing defenders in certain criminalized categories of activists and leaders.

Legitimation and delegitimation

The term "environmental and land defender" can be used both to legitimize and delegitimize particular people, and by implication, their actions, causes and the groups or movements they are part of. A good example of how the term can legitimate struggles is by asserting Indigenous sovereign authority over settler-colonial authority. In Canada, an Indigenous youth arrested for breaching a court injunction against a pipeline blockade asked the judge "why do you keep calling us protesters when we're not? We're land defenders." When the judge failed to respond, the youngster replied,

> Why can't you respect me? I thank the land and the sacred water, and I protect all the medicines here […] I'd like to know why you won't give us respect for protecting our land. Why must we be treated as a criminal for defending mother earth – everyone's mother here? We've done nothing wrong here. You're on unceded territory here […] we have the right to defend our land (cited in Simpson & Le Billon, 2021).

The challenged settler-state judge responded by threatening to remove the *defendant* from the courtroom - thereby reinscribing the violent primacy of the colonial order in his narrative while denying the youth his Indigenous political status as a legitimate *defender* of his land, medicines and environment. This rhetorical move was clearly aimed at delegitimizing his struggle (Simpson & Le Billon, 2021).

Martyrization

As demonstrated by revolutionary political groups, the figure of the martyr can play an important role in the construction of social movement identity and mobilization (Guerra, 2018; Krutzsch, 2019). A key example in relation to environmental defenders is the "Forest Hero", which was institutionalized in the UN system in 2011, with the annual UN Forest Hero Award.[7] Another example is the Goldman Environmental Prize, which states on its website that it "honors grassroots environmental heroes".[8] By associating an individual or a community with a broad cause - environmental and land justice - rather than their personal grievances and the specific conditions of their struggle, "environmental defenders" become framed as martyrs. This shift is generally operated through narratives emphasizing the persecution of defenders and the righteousness of their cause. The resulting martyrization can broaden public support, consolidate alliances, as well as increase the legitimacy of their struggle, and therefore enhance their chances of success (Rowell,2017; Scheidel et al., 2020). Yet, persecution and other legal harassment can also take a toll on movements and deter new members.

The martyrdom effects of singling certain people out as heroic "environmental defenders", as well as the effects on the outcomes of resistance, depend on a range of factors. These include: the political cultures at play, the intensity and duration of grievances, the prior profile of the defenders and their cause, the nature and strength of their solidarity network, effects on bodies and minds, and the processes of mobilization that follow (Conde & Le Billon 2017; Elidrissi & Courpasson 2019 Nixon 2016). In strong police states, extensive surveillance and systematic repression can methodically undermine socio-environmental movements. In such contexts, martyrdom may not give way to mobilization but simply lead to attrition. As a Chinese environmental NGO leader explained, "[i]f we all become martyrs, then who is left to do the work?" (Lu, 2007: 3). Somewhat similarly, environmental defenders who are persecuted in countries with high levels of political violence and homicides may not see much domestic or international media attention to their cause, even in the case of murder. In Honduras, it took the death of a very high profile "defender" - Berta Caceres - to bring about some concrete if very limited action by a government under which at least 100 "defenders" had been killed (Middeldorp & Le Billon, 2019).

The martyrdom effects of the environmental defenders label also depend on the position, outlook, and strategies of the organization and individuals involved. Whereas some members of grassroots movements may be literally willing to die for their cause, many environmental organizations selectively engage in actions according to the relative degree of protection they can benefit from. In this regard, larger environmental NGOs sometimes expose grassroots defenders to risks that they themselves do not have to face. Northern NGOs, in particular, bear a measure of responsibility for the fate of defenders in the South. They promote challenging authorities and business interests without providing adequate

[7] See https://www.un.org/esa/forests/outreach/forest-heroes/index.html [accessed 11 December 2020]
[8] See www.goldmanprize.org/about [accessed 11 December 2020]

protection for local defenders, who bear the brunt of retribution by companies and state authorities (Grant& Le Billon, 2019; 2020).

Individualization

Martyrization points to another effect of the term "defender", namely, how it tends to emphasize the individual over the broader communities and organizations involved in environmental and land struggles. While such individualization can help raise public awareness by literally "giving a face" to socio-environmental struggles, it also puts individualized defenders at increased risk, as they become likely targets for opponents seeking to intimidate communities and deter leadership. Individualization can also create tensions within affected communities by singling out particular individuals or their families, who are then held responsible for acts of retribution or repression that affect communities as a whole. Tensions can also result where communities are divided on the struggles in question, and opponents take it out on individual defenders. As observed during fieldwork, in Guinea-Bissau, environmental defenders are seen as an obstacle by community members who exploit natural resources to make a living, and who perceive having the right to exploit these resources.

Individualization is exacerbated by the focus that many advocacy and media reports place on killings, rather than the broad range of pressures exercised on communities. However, some academic and policy reports on environmental and land defenders have been cautious to emphasize the many forms of violence to which defenders, movements and communities are exposed and the collective character of the defence of land and the environment (e.g., Scheidel et al., 2020). For instance, in its definition of defenders, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP, 2018) specifically mentions "groups of people". Yet the logics and practices of advocacy and media reporting around the term "environmental defenders", and the focus on those killed can individualize "their" struggles, thereby obliterating the deeply rooted nature of resistance.

Political ostracization

Authoritarian regimes generally have repressive legislation and employ (extra)judicial mechanisms against human rights defenders, as they are seen as political opponents to ruling elites and a threat to single-party ideology. As such, the term "environmental defender", and especially EHRD, may cast defenders - and their communities - within the logics of broad political opposition, rather than the more limited (if related) issues associated with threats to land, livelihoods and environmental protection (Middeldorp & Le Billon, 2019). In Columbia, the term "environmental leaders" (*líderes ambientales*) is associated with that of "social leaders" (*líderes sociales*), who are mostly community leaders or unionists that are cast as members of leftist movements. This framing renders them a

frequent target of paramilitary forces, criminal organizations, and some government security forces, which accuse them of being enemies of "development" or even allies of leftist guerrillas (Pérez, 2018).

During the 2014 electoral campaign in Guinea-Bissau, a time when illegal logging was at its peak, environmentalists were targeted by politicians who were fuelling their campaigns with revenues from illegal logging. Consequently, the term "environmental defenders" became a dangerous designation, and there was no protection for environmentalists during this period. Silence was the only tool for these activists to protect themselves against intimidation and harassment by timber barons with close connections to high-ranking government officials.

Political ostracization and associated criminalization, however, do not only occur in authoritarian states but also in (supposed) democracies (Brock & Dunlap, 2018; Brock, 2020). Canada is a case in point. In the words of the Canadian minister in charge of natural resources, environmental defenders "threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda. … They use funding from foreign special interest groups to undermine Canada's national economic interest." (NRC, 2012; see also Le Billon & Carter 2012; Matejova, Parker & Dauvergne, 2018). The so called "War on Terror" intensified the stigmatization and criminalization of activism both in North America and the EU (Balfour, 2014; Brock & Dunlap, 2018). For instance, Europol qualifies various forms of protest and action against resource extraction companies as "single issue terrorism", which has led to increasing surveillance and criminalization (Monroy, 2011). While the term "environmental defenders" is rarely used in these contexts, this situation does highlight how those engaged in socio-environmental struggles easily come to be seen as a broader threat to ruling elites and their vested interests.

Conclusion

Presenting the voices of those designated as "environmental (and land) defenders" and evaluating the effects of this designation on the struggles they are engaged in, this chapter has demonstrated that there are both drawbacks and advantages to this label. Within our research contexts in South and North America, Africa, Asia and Europe, only few groups and movements label and identify themselves as "environmental (and land) defenders" or "environmental human rights defenders". There appears a broad consensus that this term does not accurately reflect their identities and struggles, and in many cases, is seen as an "outside" designation used primarily by international media, NGOs and the UN. Despite this, there appear to be limited concerted efforts to actively contest the term.

Many of those labelled defenders collaborate with international media reporting on their cause, accept "Forest Hero" awards and other prizes, and make use of the resources and infrastructure aimed at "defending defenders". Clearly, this is often a strategic move to mobilize international media and policy attention, attract resources, and enhance their own and others' safety. However, as this chapter has shown, these different forms of support

and recognition may have inadvertent consequences, and lead to increased repression and risks. Another reason why there are no coordinated efforts to change the notion of environmental defenders is that there is no readily available alternative umbrella term that adequately captures all the different groups included, and their varying drivers and objectives. At the same time, these groups and individuals do have certain things in common: they fight unjust practices by multinationals and governments that inflict ecological and social damage. As such, despite their diversity, they often have many experiences and views in common.

Where do these observations lead us in respect of the continued use of the term? We suggest that media, NGO and UN agencies reporting on defenders intensify their efforts to (also) present the labels these groups use themselves, to more accurately depict their self-identification, motives and objectives. We also believe that organizations supporting defenders should do more to mitigate the potential counterproductive effects of their activities. For instance, to avoid martyrization and individuation, organizations could give awards and other prizes to collectives rather than individuals. This may help avoid a situation where certain highly visible defenders run most of the risks. Moreover, instead of focusing on a few prominent and vocal "heroes", they could present a broader array of participants in resistance. In addition, they should abandon the narrow focus on killings and other forms of spectacular violence and foreground the entire spectrum of violence and repression to which defenders are exposed. Furthermore, organizations supporting defenders should intensify monitoring the political climate in which defenders operate and conduct profound risk assessments before providing any assistance. Finally, like all organizations from or mostly financed by the Global North, they should be hyper-reflexive about their privileges and the profound socio-economic and often racial inequalities separating them from the defenders they are committed to support.

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