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# WE ARE NATURE! HUMAN RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENTAL LAW, AND THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATION

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*“Th[e] separation of [humans from the rest of nature] is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing [...]. Addressing these existential crises will require us to [...] reorganize our societal relationship to nature”.*

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<sup>1</sup> Valente, Flavio. “Towards the Full Realization of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition”. *Development* 57(2), (2014): 155–170. Available at: [/link.springer.com/article/10.1057/dev.2014.75](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/dev.2014.75).

<sup>2</sup> Abbott, Alison. “Scientists bust myth that our bodies have more bacteria than human cells”. *Nature*, January 8, 2016. Available at: [www.nature.com/news/scientists-bust-myth-that-our-bodies-have-more-bacteria-than-human-cells-1.19136](https://www.nature.com/news/scientists-bust-myth-that-our-bodies-have-more-bacteria-than-human-cells-1.19136).

<sup>3</sup> Selosse, Marc-André. *Jamais seul. Ces microbes qui construisent les plantes, les animaux et les civilisations*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2017.

Humans are part of nature. There is probably no place where our intimate connection with the rest of the living world is as clear as with food. Through eating and digestion, nature is transformed into people.<sup>1</sup> This process takes place thanks to millions of microorganisms that live in our intestines and enable the human body to absorb the nutrients contained in the food we eat. This symbiosis of our bodies with the microorganisms that constitute our intestinal flora has developed over thousands of years, as a result of humans’ co-evolution with our surrounding environment. In fact, the human body contains more microorganisms than human cells.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, food production and the availability of nutritious, healthy and culturally adequate food fundamentally depend on functioning, biodiverse ecosystems as well as humans’ ability to cooperate with living beings – plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms.<sup>3</sup> Food and its social and spiritual values are equally crucial for the fabric of our communities, and thus central to our human nature as social beings. More importantly, nutritious food keeps us healthy and enables us to respond to threats, such as pathogens and illness. All of this points to the intrinsic value of nature for the well-being of human beings and societies.

Despite our deep connection with the rest of nature, modern (Western) thinking and actions, including policy-making, treat humans and the rest of nature as two separate, distinct and independent spheres. This article argues that this separation is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing, and which manifest most strongly in human-made global warming as well as in the dramatic loss of biological diversity. Both climate change and the current mass extinction will deeply affect human societies because we cannot escape from these massive disturbances.

The emergence of the novel corona virus SARS-CoV-2 and the profound crisis it has caused is yet another development that forces us to reassess our relationship with the rest of nature.<sup>4</sup> Addressing these existential crises will require us to overcome this separation and to reorganize our societal relationship to nature. This article lays out steps that may lead us in that direction, focusing on how human rights and other instruments can help clarify the human-nature relationship.

### THE ROOTS OF THE SEPARATION OF HUMANS FROM THE REST OF NATURE

In order to contribute to discussions about the way forward, it is useful to better understand where the separation between modern human societies and nature comes from. Biologically, humans are animals and without a doubt part of nature. All living beings interact with their natural environment and many species alter it to some extent. It is one of the characteristics of us humans, however, that we have taken the manipulation of the natural world to another level, and it is clear that at some point in history we passed a tipping point at which the relationship between human societies – at least a part of them, in particular modern Western societies – and the rest of nature came out of balance.

An important turning point in this development was the beginning of modernity. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a scientific ‘revolution’ took place in Europe, which fundamentally changed the way in which societies viewed the world around them.<sup>5</sup> This has had far-reaching implications for the way in which societies organize, and how they treat nature. New scientific methods of measuring, surveying, classifying, and valuing were applied to the natural world, in an attempt to dominate it. This implied that human societies and the rest of nature were increasingly seen as two distinct and independent spheres. Europe’s scientific ‘revolution’ coincided with the early days of European colonialism and the dawning age of empire. The new methods were quickly brought to the ‘new worlds’ and played an important part in their subjugation and exploitation.

Importantly, both the scientific ‘revolution’ and the beginning of European imperialism are closely linked to the rise of (early) capitalism. The new scientific methods enabled the systematic and violent extraction of wealth from the colonies, as well as the enclosure of the commons in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Capitalism is fundamentally premised on the separation of humanity and nature. It is based on the transformation of natural goods into tradeable commodities, and the monetization of natural use values<sup>7</sup> – in addition to the exploitation of human labor. This entails the domination of our natural environment. Consequently, capitalism not only uses the natural world to extract and accumulate wealth, but also creates a specific narrative of what ‘nature’ is.

Capitalism’s governing conception is that it may do with the natural world as it pleases, that nature is something external, which can be fragmented, and rationalized to serve economic exploitation.<sup>8</sup> Nature is therefore partitioned into units, which are then put under property rights. As a consequence, capitalism has radically altered nature and landscapes, creating entirely new ecosystems, such as the monoculture plantations of industrial agriculture.<sup>9</sup> This way of radically altering, exploiting and destroying the natural world continues until today, and we are now seeing new frontiers of the exploitation of nature. In the context of the so-called ‘green’ and ‘blue’ economies, nature has been redefined as a set of ecosystem services to which monetary value is attributed and which consequently can be traded in order to generate profits. The division of the living world into units that can be

4 For more information on COVID-19, please see article “The Coronavirus Pandemic: A Critical Reflection on Corporate Food Patterns” in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*. See also: Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves and Rodrick Wallace. “COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital”. *Monthly Review*. April 1, 2020. Available at: <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/04/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital>.

5 Koyré, Alexandre. *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press. 1957.

6 The enclosure of the commons refers to the process of transfer of lands that had been part of the commons to private ownership. It started in the late middle ages and intensified in the 18th century.

7 Please see: Harvey, David. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. New York: Oxfam University Press, 2014.

8 Moore, Jason W. “The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis”. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:3, (2017): 594-630. Available at: [/doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036).

9 Harvey. *Supra* note 7.

quantified and valued financially has led to the creation of new markets, such as carbon markets and emerging biodiversity markets. The creation of specific financial instruments, such as derivatives and carbon credits, marks a new dimension of how the natural world has been transformed into a source of wealth extraction for big business and global finance.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, Land, Forests, Water and Territory Working Group. “Rogue capitalism and the Financialization of Territories”, IPC, Forthcoming.

## A DISCONNECT BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

The separation of human societies from the rest of nature in modern Western societies is reflected, among other aspects, in a largely disconnected development between international human rights law on the one hand and environmental law on the other.

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) as well as the two core human rights treaties – the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, 1966) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR, 1966) – are largely silent on nature, except for article 1.2 of both the ICCPR and the ICESCR, which establishes the principle that peoples have sovereignty over their natural resources. They do not, however, explicitly address the relationship between nature and human dignity, as core objective of human rights. In the further development of the international human rights framework, nature – mainly referred to as ‘the environment’<sup>11</sup> – has been largely treated, if at all, as something that is functional for human economic development, thus (implicitly) accepting the separation of two distinct spheres. In recent years and to a large part thanks to pressure by civil society organizations, there have been developments that could be an opening to a more integrated approach to the inter-relationship between humanity and nature. One step has been the creation, by the UN Human Rights Council, of a dedicated mandate on human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The work of the two special rapporteurs with this mandate has contributed to understanding that protection of the natural environment is indispensable for the effective enjoyment of human rights.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> While the term ‘nature’ encompasses the multi-functionality of nature as being inherently/intrinsically valuable in its own right, as well as its functions as being integral to or useful for the reproduction of human society, ‘the environment’ is a construct that alienates nature from humans.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, please see: [www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx).

It is also important to note that over the years, the work of the human rights treaty bodies and institutions has increasingly recognized the special relationship that specific groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, peasants, small-scale fishers, pastoralists, etc. have with their natural environment. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP, 2018), adopted in December 2018 as results of mobilizations of Indigenous Peoples, peasant movements and other rural people’s organizations, are important milestones in this regard. Both documents recognize the crucial contributions of nature-dependent groups to maintain healthy ecosystems, and clarify their specific rights as well as states’ obligations in this regard. Another important instrument of international law is the *Escazú Agreement* (2018) by the Latin American and Caribbean region, which explicitly recognizes, among others, human rights defenders in environmental matters.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*. 2018. Available at: [repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/1/S1800428\\_en.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/1/S1800428_en.pdf).

In parallel, since the 1970s, discussions in the context of the development of international environmental law have intensified in a context of increasing concern about rapid environmental degradation caused by human activity. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment adopted the Stockholm Declaration, which is the first document in international law to link human rights and environmental protection. However, the framing of this declaration remains human-centered, and focused on states’ sovereignty over their national territories.

The report *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as Brundtland Commission) of 1987 goes further inasmuch as it is sensitive to the connections between environmental protection, development, and efforts to reduce poverty, within the integrative concept of sustainable development. However, it remains rooted in the premise that the natural environment is a resource that humans are entitled to use for their benefit. In that framing, any human can claim, as a right of entitlement, the availability of a certain level of quality of that resource.<sup>14</sup> This is opposed to claims by Indigenous Peoples for a right to healthy ecosystems, as these cannot be fragmented and attributed to different interest groups.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as Rio Summit) was a crucial stepping stone in the development of international environmental law. In the context of the summit, important international conventions were negotiated and adopted, which have shaped the way in which states and the UN multilateral system address global environmental problems ever since, namely the UN *Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC, 1992), the UN *Convention to Combat Desertification* (UNCCD, 1992), and the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD, 1992). It is worth stressing that environmental and climate agreements do not refer to any environmental or climate rights of people or communities. In addition, they do not establish strong accountability mechanisms to protect people and communities vis-à-vis state actions or omissions in the context of environmental protection or climate change mitigation. As a consequence, conservationist approaches that are based on the assumption that nature can only be protected if humans are excluded, have led to the expulsion of rural communities and Indigenous Peoples from their lands and territories in many parts of the world. Similarly, measures to address climate change under the UNFCCC, such as REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) have resulted in violation of several human rights of individuals and communities who depend on such ecosystems and make sustainable use of them.<sup>15</sup> Overall, provisions in environmental and climate instruments focus on procedural aspects, such as mandatory environmental assessments and exchange of information, and less on substantive obligations of states to secure a certain environmental quality. In practice, this usually means that economic interests prevail over both preservation objectives and human rights protection. It is worth noting, however, that food is addressed as an integral element of the UNFCCC's objective.<sup>16</sup>

Recent advances in the development of international human rights law indicate increased awareness and concern about the complex relationships between human societies and their natural environment. Similarly, environmental and climate law are more sensitive to the need for today's measures to respect human rights. The CBD recognizes certain rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including their traditional knowledge, innovations and practices,<sup>17</sup> as well as the inextricable link between biological and cultural diversity. This has been the basis for explicitly recognizing their rights to seeds in the *International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture* (ITPGRFA, 2004). However, only recently and very slowly, states have started to recognize that small-scale food producers and their agroecological management practices are key contributions to ensuring healthy and functioning ecosystems; and that this, in turn, requires the protection of their human rights in order to preserve biodiversity. Another example is the recent recognition by the UNCCD that effective measures to achieve its objectives require the respect and protection of local people's and communities' tenure rights.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Please see: Aiken, William. "Human Rights in an Ecological Era". *Environmental Values* 1, no. 3, (1992): 191-203. Available at: [www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/human-rights-ecological-era](http://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/human-rights-ecological-era).

<sup>15</sup> Please see: Friends of the Earth International. REDD+: *The carbon market and the California-Acre-Chiapas cooperation*. 2017. Available at: [www.foei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/REDD-The-carbon-market-and-the-California-Acre-Chiapas-cooperation.pdf](http://www.foei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/REDD-The-carbon-market-and-the-California-Acre-Chiapas-cooperation.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> UNFCCC, article 2.

<sup>17</sup> CBD, article 8j.

<sup>18</sup> In 2019, the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) adopted a decision in which member states commit to review development policies, including land use policies and agricultural practices to promote ecological regeneration on a large scale using the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (2012) as a key reference. For more information, please see: [www.unccd.int/news-events/new-delhi-declaration-investing-land-and-unlocking-opportunities](http://www.unccd.int/news-events/new-delhi-declaration-investing-land-and-unlocking-opportunities).

## RECONFIGURING HUMAN SOCIETIES' RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REST OF NATURE: ELEMENTS FOR A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

When thinking about the way forward, it is important to situate the current environmental crises within the context of the broader, multiple crises that we are witnessing. The looming collapse of the earth system as well as the rapid degradation of local ecosystems is closely linked to the sharp increase of inequalities and the concentration of resources in the hands of a few powerful actors, the destruction of the social fabric from community to national level and resulting migration, as well as wars and famine. The consequence is increasing violence against communities and people, which is further exacerbated by the rise of authoritarianism in all parts of the world. Non-white-male people and in particular women are particularly affected by such violence.<sup>19</sup> There is indeed a close link between the way societies (mis)treat and exploit humans on the one hand and nature on the other.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the close linkages between the domination of nature and domination of women, please see: Andrews, Donna, Smith, Kiah, and M Alejandra Morena. "Enraged: Women and Nature". *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2019): 6. Available at: [www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/enraged-women-and-nature](http://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/enraged-women-and-nature).

<sup>20</sup> Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom. The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Oakland: AK Press, 2005. For Bookchin, "the very notion of the domination of nature by man [sic] stems from the very real domination of human by human" (p. 65); Andrews et al. *Supra* note 19.

Another aspect to take into account is the increasing weakness and dysfunctionality of governance spaces, in particular public, democratic institutions. Some expressions of this are institutional fragmentation, competing law regimes, and lack of policy coherence. To a great extent, the weakness of democratic governance is the result of deliberate attacks from global business and finance on the one hand, which have succeeded in putting forward 'multi-stakeholderism' as a way of being part of decision-making at all levels, and chauvinistic nationalism on the other. Strategies aiming at overcoming the divide thus need to be comprehensive and address human rights, environmental justice, social justice, gender justice and democratic governance that is based on people's sovereignty as interconnected elements of radical transformation.

As mentioned above, we argue that overcoming the separation of humans from the rest of nature will be critical if we are to overcome the current crises. This will require recognizing non-Western cultures and worldviews, as well as deconstructing and decolonizing our minds and actions. A first crucial step is to ensure the full respect and protection of the rights and ways of living of Indigenous Peoples' as well as other groups that are deeply connected to the living environment, in particular small-scale food producers such as peasants, small-scale fishers, pastoralists and forest dwellers. Particular attention needs to be given to women in communities who often have a special connection to seeds, forests, and wild plants, and who are subject to structural discrimination and exclusion. This requires defending, reclaiming and strengthening public governance spaces and institutions with adequate participation mechanisms as well as working towards accountability strategies that combine human rights as well as environmental and climate law instruments in a mutually strengthening manner.

## RE-INTERPRETING AND FURTHER DEVELOPING INTERNATIONAL LAW

The recent adoption of UNDROP provides an opportunity to re-interpret key instruments of environmental and climate law from a human rights perspective, taking into account UNDRIP as well as other relevant human rights standards. This is critical to clarify the relationship between the rights of peoples, groups and communities that directly depend on functioning ecosystems and the protection of such systems. The CBD, for instance, is built upon the premise that states have sovereignty over the genetic resources in their jurisdiction. The question that arises from the recognition of specific rights of Indigenous Peoples and other rural people related to such resources by UNDRIP and UNDROP (as well as other human rights

instruments) then is: what do states' sovereign responsibilities entail in terms of obligations to protect and guarantee communities' and people's rights? Answering this question could help policy-makers and other actors understand that key to addressing the rapid decline of biodiversity and climate change is the effective protection of Indigenous Peoples' and other rural peoples' management and production systems, including their tenure rights and systems, among other measures. This, as well as a better linkage between human rights spaces with those dealing with environmental, biodiversity and climate issues is crucial in order to establish multifunctional and inter-sectorial policies and institutions, which are able to address the contemporary world's multifaceted challenges.

In addition to the above, the international policy framework needs further developing in a way that brings the two spheres of international law – on human rights and on the environment – together, both conceptually and practically. Proposals to fully recognize a human right to a healthy environment could be a promising entry point and an opportunity to move beyond approaches that see nature or the 'environment' merely as functional to human survival. This could be an important contribution to ensure human dignity as well as social and environmental justice within a healthy earth and healthy ecosystems.<sup>21</sup> The global dialogue towards the explicit recognition of this critical right could benefit from existing experiences that recognize rights of nature in legal frameworks.<sup>22</sup> Human rights as well as ecological and climate concerns need to be brought together, in order to clearly formulate states' obligations to ensure healthy ecosystems, locally and globally. Once again, existing entry points, such as the rights to biodiversity and the rights to land and natural resources, as well as their sustainable use, as recognized by UNDROP, provide important building blocks. Indigenous Peoples and communities, in particular those of small-scale food producers, are those who take care of most ecosystems; protecting and strengthening their rights is therefore a key obligation of states. However, the process of reconciling legal frameworks would also have to address challenges such as establishing limits to the human use of natural resources and the question of how to deal with situations of conflicts between human needs and ecological protection. It also requires to clarify states' obligations under human rights law to take all necessary measures "to the maximum of its available resources"<sup>23</sup> in the face of the current ecological crises.

### **AGROECOLOGY: RADICALLY TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS AND SOCIETIES**

As explained above, the capitalistic organization of societies is at the root of the current crises. Since the beginning of modernity, Western societies have been functioning upon the conviction that humans were not only distinct from the rest of nature, but independent from it. This conception has been imposed on the rest of the world through imperialism and, more recently, globalization.<sup>24</sup> Today, global warming, mass extinction and the emergence and rapid spread of new pathogens like SARS-CoV-2 clearly challenge this conception. As capitalism is built on the premise that it may do with nature as it pleases, it now confronts a reality that it cannot – at least not without provoking profound crises that threaten human survival.

Given the dire state of the planet, we need nothing less than a radical transformation of capitalistic societies. As such, the current crises may offer an important opportunity, and food is an excellent starting point, because of its key importance for human survival, and because it demonstrates our close links with nature.

<sup>21</sup> There are also proposals for a third international human rights covenant on the rights of human beings to the environment. For more information, please visit: [cidce.org/en/droits-de-lhomme-a-lenvironnement-human-right-to-the-environment/](http://cidce.org/en/droits-de-lhomme-a-lenvironnement-human-right-to-the-environment/).

<sup>22</sup> Examples include Ecuador's Constitution, Bolivia's legislation on Mother Earth as well as Aotearoa/New Zealand's agreement between the State and the Maori people.

<sup>23</sup> ICESCR, article 2.1.

<sup>24</sup> Moore. *Supra* note 8.

Based on the decades-long struggles of small-scale food producers' organizations and Indigenous Peoples, the food sovereignty movement has developed a clear vision and proposals for fundamentally reshaping food systems and power relations. These should constitute the basis for a profound transformation of our societies, in particular towards localized, circular economies. In the context of the ecological crises, agroecology has become a critical proposal for transformation. Agroecology refers to a way of food production and management that builds on and stimulates natural processes in order to boost resilience and productivity. Co-evolution of human communities with their natural environment is opposed to the domination, exploitation and destruction of nature in the currently dominant industrial food system. One illustration of this is the diversity of peasant production, based on the constant adaptation of seeds to local conditions. Another key aspect is the enhancement of soil fertility by creating living soils, instead of conceiving them as a mere substrate to which a given set of nutrients need to be added so that it can be absorbed by plants. Agroecological practices enhance organic processes, thus increasing resilience to climate change and other factors. Living soils store carbon and the contribution of production systems to counter global warming increases where crops are combined with trees and animals.

In addition to its crucial contribution to counter global warming and the rapid loss of biodiversity, agroecology fundamentally challenges power structures. As said before, the capitalistic domination of nature goes hand in hand with the exclusion and exploitation of certain groups of society, in particular women,<sup>25</sup> Indigenous Peoples, people of color, as well as peasants, pastoralists, small-scale fishers and other rural people. Developing and implementing policies for a transition to agroecology therefore also presents an opportunity to respect, protect and fulfill human rights of marginalized groups.

In order to tap the full potential of agroecology as a way of re-situating humans within the natural world, and to overcome structural discrimination, it is crucial to conceive it as a central part of states' human rights and environmental and climate law obligations.<sup>26</sup> The realization of the rights of peasants, Indigenous Peoples and other rural people to seeds and biodiversity is an essential part of this. Another key element is to ensure the control over land and other natural resources by people and communities, by means of an effective protection of their tenure and management systems, in particular those based on collective rights. Only with secure tenure rights will communities be able to play their role as custodians/stewards of ecosystems and living nature. What is more, we need an agroecological agrarian reform that ensures equitable and just distribution of land and related natural resources. All in all, agroecology is a key strategy to reshape the relationship of human societies with the rest of nature, and a pathway to an economic and societal model that remunerates people and nature, instead of dominant actors, in particular business and global finance.

<sup>25</sup> As stated by Andrews et al., *Supra* note 19: "Indeed, a long history of feminist analysis has drawn attention to the ways that women, nature and the 'other' are viewed as subordinate to the dominant 'norm' of white, male capitalism". For an analysis of how exclusion of and violence against women has been a central part in the development of early capitalism, please see: Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> FIAN International. *Agroecology and the Human Right to Food and Nutrition. Analytical Briefing Paper*. Forthcoming.





### IN BRIEF

Humans are part of nature. Food is the most manifest expression of our intimate connection with the rest of the living world. However, modern Western thinking and actions treat humans and the rest of nature as two separate spheres. Capitalism in particular is built on the premise that it can dominate and exploit the natural world in order to generate profits. This article argues that this separation is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing and which manifest most strongly in human-made global warming as well as the dramatic loss of biological diversity. The COVID-19 pandemic also forces us to reassess our relationship with the rest of nature. Addressing the existential crises that humanity is facing will require to overcome this separation. This article intends to lay out some steps that could lead us in that direction, focusing on how human rights and other instruments could better clarify the human-nature relationship.

The approval of human rights instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas provide an opportunity to re-interpret key instruments of environmental and climate law and to advance the protection of local communities as custodians of ecosystems. Effective implementation and bridging of existing human rights as well as environmental and climate law instruments will have to be complemented by developing further the international policy framework in a way that brings those two spheres of international law together, both conceptually and practically. Furthermore, we need nothing less than a radical transformation of capitalistic societies, building on the long struggles of small-scale food producers' organizations and Indigenous Peoples for food sovereignty and agroecology.



### KEY CONCEPTS

- The human-nature separation is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing, in particular global warming and mass extinction.
- The human-nature separation and domination are central to capitalism, which is based on the transformation of natural goods into tradeable commodities, and the monetization of natural use values – in addition to the exploitation of human labor.
- The separation of human societies from the rest of nature is reflected in a largely disconnected development between international human rights law on the one hand, and environmental law on the other.

- The current environmental crises need to be understood within the context of the broader, multiple crises that we are witnessing.
- Overcoming the separation of humans from the rest of nature requires ensuring the full respect and protection of the rights and ways of living of small-scale food producers who are deeply connected to the living environment; further developing the international policy framework in a way that brings human rights and environmental law together; and a radical transformation of capitalistic societies, based on food sovereignty and agroecology.



#### **KEY WORDS**

- Climate change
- Biodiversity
- Ecosystems
- Human rights
- Environmental and climate law
- Indigenous Peoples
- Peasants
- Capitalism
- Food sovereignty
- Agroecology

