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General Assembly Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)

The [General Assembly Third Committee](#) focuses its discussions on social, humanitarian and cultural concerns that arise in the General Assembly, although its work often overlaps with that of other United Nations organs, including the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies. Human rights, education and cultural preservation are typical issues for the Third Committee. Notably, the Third Committee would not discuss the legal implications of human rights matters, as those are discussed by the Sixth Committee, nor would it call for special studies or deploy monitors, as those tasks are handled by the Human Rights Council. The Third Committee also adheres to the purview guidelines of the [General Assembly](#) as a whole.

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The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity

Between 2017 and 2022, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that [85 percent of the world's population](#) experienced some form of erosion in freedom of the press. Within this environment, physical and digital threats against journalists are high. Between 2006 and 2020, UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists reports that [over 1,200 journalists](#) were killed. In 2022, [84 journalists were killed](#), [half of whom](#) while off duty and many in public places. Even when journalists are not killed, [the threat of intimidation and violence](#) remains high.

The issue of impunity—a lack of judicial remedy for these crimes—is a further challenge that has not shown significant improvement. With [as many as 87 percent](#) of journalist killings going unsolved and unpunished, impunity creates a continued cycle of violence against journalists and [promotes a toxic environment of self-censorship and intimidation](#). While most of the journalists killed are men, [73 percent of women journalists](#) say they have experienced some form of online violence and 20 percent saying they had been attacked or abused offline,

contributing to [stagnating gender equality in the journalism profession](#). Data show that journalist killings and impunity [are typically correlated](#)—the lack of response to crimes against journalists begets future harms.

[Article 19](#) of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights holds that everyone has the right to freely “seek, receive and impart” information and ideas through any media. Similar language is contained in [Article 19](#) of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In 1992, following a UNESCO seminar, the [Declaration of Windhoek](#) celebrated African and worldwide democratization as welcome changes to provide the legal and social climates in which a pluralistic and independent press could emerge. Despite promising trends at the time, the Declaration noted that journalists were victims of violence and State-led repression. As a matter of human rights, [the Declaration prioritized](#) funding from governmental and non-governmental sources to consolidate the positive changes and counter the negative ones. In 1993, the General Assembly declared 3 May, the Anniversary of the Declaration of Windhoek, as [World Press Freedom Day](#). That year, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) also [created](#) a mandate for the [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), whose purview includes the protection of the rights of journalists and media. In 1997, UNESCO, the lead United Nations agency on freedom of expression, [passed a resolution](#) condemning violence against journalists.

In 2012, UNESCO, the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly approved the [United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#), the first-ever strategic plan for protecting journalists. The Plan of Action contains a variety of strategies, including raising awareness, capacity building at State and regional levels, and developing strategies and metrics for tracking progress on initiatives. Building off of the Plan of Action, the General Assembly [declared](#) 2 November as the [International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists](#). The Security Council in 2015 [built off of its own previous work](#) in [affirming the civilian status of journalists in war zones](#), condemning violence against women journalists in particular and urging Member States to form regional and sub-regional organizations to share information and expertise. The General Assembly has also focused in recent years on [the effects of the shifting of media to digital spaces](#) and [ensuring journalists are not unjustly persecuted in connection to their actions online](#). In 2015, the General Assembly adopted the Agenda for Sustainable Development. Press freedom was included as [Target 16.10](#) of Sustainable Development Goal 16, pertaining to peace, justice and strong institutions. This includes measurable progress indicators for both the number of journalists killed or arrested and the passage of national laws supporting press freedoms. In 2018, UNESCO established the [Observatory of Killed Journalists](#), an important element in monitoring and reporting on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. This database works alongside others maintained by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ), [Reporters Without Borders](#) (RSF) and the [International Federation of Journalists](#) (IFJ). In 2021, the [Windhoek+30 Declaration](#) was adopted in recognition of the thirtieth anniversary of the original Declaration of Windhoek. The Windhoek+30 Declaration called for greater regional cooperation in Africa, along with a stronger focus on digital

technologies and called on technology companies to help support information as a public good.

In the eleven years since the adoption of the Plan of Action, [there have been successes](#) in creating new mechanisms that support the safety of journalists. Investment of adequate time and resources, implementation of an agreed upon methodology of data collection and the systemic analysis of disaggregated data serve as [important first steps](#) in increasing the safety of journalists and eliminating impunity. However, those successes have not been enough to prevent [the rise in deaths, attacks and imprisonment of journalists](#) in 2022, [nor to reduce impunity](#) for those acts. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression used [a 2022 report](#) to highlight how attacks on journalists and media organizations enable the spread of disinformation and propaganda by State and non-state actors, arguing that many States have chosen not to uphold their obligations under international law due to a lack of political will. The Special Rapporteur [has also argued](#) that further study of the true efficacy of the mechanisms put in place under the Plan of Action is necessary to truly assess whether they are bringing about meaningful change. [NGOs have also criticized the United Nations](#) for failing to fully account for the scope of risk journalists face, focusing SDG Target 16.10 metrics on killings and judicial actions rather than the more pernicious forms of harassment, intimidation and targeted surveillance that can silence the free press. In late 2022, a group of press freedom NGOs released [a formal call to action](#) to Member States and the United Nations System to bolster safety of journalists, reduce impunity, better engage diverse stakeholders and address specific gender-based risks.

In the meantime, the challenges that journalists and media outlets face continue to rise. During the COVID-19 pandemic, independent media [rose to the challenge](#) of reporting on important stories, [often putting individual safety at great risk](#) in a background of [rising disinformation](#) and [suppression of press freedoms](#). The ongoing war in Ukraine has also highlighted the challenges that journalists face both in [covering war zones](#) and in [dealing with States whose laws do not protect the free press](#).

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- How can Member States address the rapidly changing and growing issues that online and other digital forms of media raise for journalists' safety in person and online?
- How can the United Nations work with States, regional bodies and NGOs to strengthen mechanisms for protecting journalists and ensuring freedom of expression?
- How can the United Nations foster gender equality in journalism and protect women online and in-person from targeted harassment and violence?

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Preventing and combating crimes that affect the environment

Crimes that affect the environment—such as illegal [mining](#), [deforestation](#), [waste disposal](#), [fishing](#) and [wildlife trafficking](#)—are a wide array of activities that are diverse not only in the forms they take but in their perpetrators, being committed by individuals, companies, States and organized criminal groups alike. These crimes have devastating environmental impacts including habitat loss, pollution, loss of biodiversity and increased occurrence of [human disease](#). Importantly, these crimes often co-occur with other serious crimes including smuggling, corruption, money laundering and human trafficking. These crimes can be highly lucrative; [a 2018 Interpol estimate](#) suggests that crimes that affect the environment generate 110 to 281 billion US dollars annually, while [the World Bank in 2019](#) estimated their cost to society at 1 to 2 trillion US dollars annually. Because of these factors, efforts to prevent and combat these crimes must be comprehensive and collaborative.

Historically speaking, the regulation of crimes against the environment was largely confined to international law pertaining to specific areas of interest. International instruments such as the 1973 [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna](#); the 1982 [United Nations Convention on Laws of the Sea](#), which regulates fisheries; and the 1989 [Basel](#)

[Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal](#) were used to set standards pertaining to specific areas of environmental protection. Over the past three decades, the international community has come to recognize the importance of addressing the impact of crimes on the environment. In 1990, at the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in Havana, Cuba, the international community discussed officially for the first time what the [role of criminal law should be in environmental protection](#). At the [Ninth Congress](#), five years later, focus was placed on environmental crimes such as trafficking in wastes and wildlife trafficking and the groundwork was laid for future work. Concurrently, the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), passed resolution [1994/15](#) on the role of criminal law in the protection of the environment.

In 2000, the General Assembly adopted the [United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime \(UNTOC\)](#), which focuses on implementing universal standards and building capacity to target organized crime activities, including trafficking of humans, firearms and illicit goods as well as money laundering and corruption. Three years later, the General Assembly adopted the [United Nations Convention Against Corruption \(UNCAC\)](#), which encourages information exchange and cooperation in targeting both public and private sector corruption. While the original texts of UNTOC and UNCAC make no formal mention of crimes that affect the environment, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Member States [have used both conventions extensively](#) in tackling international flows of illegal goods and money connected to environmental crime.

The international community recognized emerging forms of crime and their threat to the environment with the [2010 Salvador Declaration](#) on Comprehensive Strategies for Global Challenges: Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Systems and Their Development in a Changing World. Following the Salvador Declaration, the [CCPCJ declared](#) the twenty-second session of CCPCJ to have the prominent theme of “The challenge posed by emerging forms of crime that have a significant impact on the environment and ways to deal with it effectively.” This growing focus was then supported by the 2015 [Doha Declaration](#) on integrating crime prevention and criminal justice into the wider United Nations agenda. Through the Doha Declaration, Member States committed to supporting efforts to counter activities associated with crimes affecting the environment including money laundering, organized crime and corruption. It was in this international context that the first resolution on preventing and combating crimes that affect the environment would be passed. In 2016, the International Criminal Court also released [a policy paper](#) outlining, [for the first time](#), a process for prosecuting environmental crimes at the international level.

In 2021, UNODC released [the Kyoto Declaration](#), the outcome document of the Fourteenth Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, which referenced the need for strengthened approaches to fighting environmental crime. At the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27), [UNODC participated in discussions](#) on the intersection of environmental crime and biodiversity loss and the effects of illegal plastic pollution on the

environment. They also released [research papers](#) in concert with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) on the relationship between environmental crime and climate change. These reports have highlighted some successes in capacity building and implementing regional approaches, but also point to ongoing challenges.

As crimes that affect the environment continue to [wreak havoc](#) while [becoming more integrated](#) with other forms of organized crime, the international community continues to [try to build approaches](#) that take the diffuse and complex nature of the crimes into account. These approaches largely fall into two areas: directly combating existing illegal activities and preventing future environmental crimes from taking place, and there are obstacles to achieving both sides. UNODC and its partners [have identified](#) gaps in available information, lack of enforcement capacity, weak or ineffectual laws and lack of international cooperation as limiting factors in responding to environmental crimes. However, [researchers have questioned](#) whether current enforcement-centric approaches have created harmful outcomes and target low-level actors while failing to affect the root causes of environmental crime, stop more powerful actors or meaningfully disrupt transnational flows of illicit goods and money.

At the same time, these crimes also have human costs that are not always fully accounted for. A common concern from [researchers](#) and [non-governmental organizations](#) is the perception that environmental crimes are either “victimless” or purely related to environmental conservation. However, environmental crimes are [one of the largest drivers of financing](#) of armed conflict, prolonging fighting and bringing about [attendant humanitarian crises](#). This is compounded by the fact that crimes affecting the environment disproportionately affect least developed countries in the Global South, which are abundant in exploitable natural resources but may lack the institutional controls or financial resources to address the issues as they occur. Successful approaches to combating crimes that affect the environment require a high level of cooperation between international organizations, States, communities, civil societies and private actors to make meaningful change

Questions to consider from your country’s perspective:

- How can the United Nations help Member States to better coordinate responses to transnational crimes that affect the environment?
- How can the United Nations help States develop the instruments and capacities to take on environmental crimes within their own borders?
- How can the international community better target the underlying root causes of environmental crimes before they require an active enforcement approach?
- How can the international community help to support those whose enjoyment of their fundamental human rights has been hampered by environmental crimes?

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