

Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders

International Dalit Solidarity Network input on the situation of human rights defenders working on climate change and a just transition

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) was founded in March 2000 to advocate for Dalit human rights and to raise awareness of Dalit issues nationally and internationally. IDSN is a network of international human rights groups, development agencies, national Dalit solidarity networks from Europe and national platforms in caste-affected countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka).

1. Positive Trends

Climate change is exacerbating pre-existing caste hierarchies across South Asia. Accordingly, Dalit human rights defenders (HRDs) are advocating to demand justice in adaptation and transition processes. While systemic support remains limited, some positive developments have emerged across India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

In India, Dalit women farmers from the Deccan Development Society in Telangana have received national and international recognition for leading sustainable, millet-based organic farming initiatives rooted in food sovereignty and climate resilience. Their participation at the UN's COP15 was emblematic of increasing global visibility for caste-oppressed environmental voices, which had long been marginalised in international climate forums¹. This advocacy has inspired younger HRDs to connect environmental sustainability with socio-economic rights.

In Nepal, the government's Local Adaptation Plans of Action and the National Adaptation Plan framework include a commitment to social inclusion. In some areas, NGOs, such as the Dalit Welfare Organisation, have utilised this legislation to involve Dalit representatives in community-level adaptation planning processes².

Dalit human rights defenders in Bangladesh's coastal regions, inhabited by large Dalit communities, have increasingly advocated vocally for inclusive disaster response. Following Cyclone Amphan, rights defenders successfully lobbied district officials to revise relief

¹ "Upper Caste Farmers Grow Money, We Grow Food", International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2015. Accessible at: <https://idsn.org/resources/case-stories/upper-caste-farmers-grow-money-we-grow-food/>

² Questionnaire in relation to Human Rights Council resolution 53/6 on human rights and climate change, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024.

protocols, resulting in targeted efforts to include Dalits in aid distribution and cyclone shelters³.

In Pakistan, caste-oppressed groups, including Dalit Christians and Hindus supported by the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network, have highlighted their exclusion from climate disaster responses. In Sindh, this advocacy led to discussions within provincial assemblies that called for relief to be extended equitably to all caste groups⁴.

In Sri Lanka, plantation workers, largely from oppressed Tamil castes, face heightened climate vulnerability. In response to an increasing risk, civil society actors and trade unions have supported calls for the resettlement of hill communities due to landslides. In addition, some municipal-level initiatives have begun recognising caste-marginalised areas as high-risk zones⁵.

A notable regional trend is the emergence of intersectional coalitions. Dalit HRDs increasingly collaborate with Adivasi, feminist, fisherfolk and labour rights movements to advocate for inclusive adaptation and mitigation frameworks. In India and Nepal, such coalitions have pushed for the inclusion of caste-oppressed representatives in disaster preparedness committees and forest user groups⁶.

IDSN has played a central role in amplifying these efforts. It has submitted evidence from Dalit HRDs to UN Special Rapporteurs, supported strategic litigation and led campaigns for the inclusion of caste in all UN and OHCHR processes. Supporting the "Dalit ecologies" framework, which links historical caste-based exclusion with environmental degradation, legitimises Dalit voices in climate justice dialogues⁷.

Digital advocacy is growing, particularly among Dalit youth. Whilst digital media spheres pose risks to HRDs, they can also facilitate the diversification, democratisation and increased reach of climate advocacy by marginalised communities. HRDs in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have used social media to highlight caste disparities during 2022 heatwaves, prompting state-level inquiries⁸. Through collective efforts, Dalit HRDs are beginning to reshape and re-define climate justice discourses from the margins.

³ *Droughts, Dalits and Adivasis, A Study on the Impact of Droughts catalysed by Climate Change on the Dalits and the Adivasis of Marathwada region of Maharashtra*, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2022. Accessible at: <http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NCDHR-Drought-Report-low-res.pdf>.

⁴ *IDSN-EU Submission on Sustainable Corporate Governance, Consultation for an Initiative on Sustainable Corporate Governance*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024. Accessible at: https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IDSN-EU-Submission_website-version-1.pdf.

⁵ *Seen, But Not Heard, Exploring Intersections – Climate Change Adaptation, Gender and Adolescents*, Dasra and India Climate Collaborative, 2022. Accessible at: <https://www.wocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/seen-but-not-heard-final-report.pdf>

⁶ *IDSN Recommendations to the Human Rights Council 58th Session*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2025.

⁷ *Towards Dalit Ecologies*, Environment and Society, 13, Indulata Prasad, 2022. Accessible at: <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/environment-and-society/13/1/ares130107.xml>.

⁸ *IDSN-EU Submission on Sustainable Corporate Governance, Consultation for an Initiative on Sustainable Corporate Governance*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024.

2. Successes

Dalit HRDs operate within systemic restriction and barriers. However, there have been notable examples of successful climate activism led by Dalit HRDs and their allies.

AS stated above, in Telangana, India, Dalit women of the Deccan Development Society successfully reclaimed marginal farmland to cultivate drought-resistant millet varieties. Following this cultivation, they extended their advocacy to challenge dominant caste-centric agrarian models. Their slogan of “Upper caste farmers grow money, we grow food”^{*} highlighted an ecological justice narrative deeply rooted in caste critique⁹. Their leadership at COP15 in Copenhagen drew international attention to caste-based exclusion from climate discourse and resulted in greater civil society interest in supporting caste-inclusive ecological practices¹⁰.

In Bangladesh, caste-oppressed communities faced exclusion during and following Cyclone Amphan, including denial of shelter access and relief. Significantly, HRDs documented this omission. Following the event, local officials in Khulna and Satkhira used this information to revise shelter policies to ensure inclusivity, marking a precedent for responsive governance in disaster response. Additionally, during this period, Dalit women’s groups attempted to provide independent aid where state delivery had failed¹¹.

In Nepal’s Terai region, Dalit farmers, supported by environmental and legal NGOs, successfully challenged the discriminatory diversion of irrigation canals that disproportionately harmed Dalit-owned plots. A district court ruled that this practice violated constitutional equality, ordering equitable water access, which established a legal basis for inclusion in resource governance¹².

On the international stage, submissions by IDSN and its members have successfully ensured that caste-affected communities are cited in reports by the UN Special Rapporteurs, such as the Special Rapporteurs on climate change and on extreme poverty. This recognition has begun shaping discourse around caste and climate at the UN level. IDSN calls for the adoption of the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent, which IDSN views as an essential step towards establishing a legally binding UN convention on caste-based discrimination.

Academically, the emergence of “Dalit ecologies” as a field of study has linked caste injustice with environmental exploitation, stressing their inherently interconnected nature,

^{*} The term ‘Upper caste’, whilst used in this article and campaign, is not deemed by IDSN to be the correct terminology. The term ‘Upper caste’ implies, and thus tacitly reinforces, the discriminatory hierarchy imposed by the caste system. Thus, IDSN strongly urges the use of ‘oppressed caste’ (rather than lower caste) and ‘dominant caste’ (rather than upper caste).

⁹ “Upper Caste Farmers Grow Money, We Grow Food”, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2015.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Droughts, Dalits and Adivasis, A Study on the Impact of Droughts catalysed by Climate Change on the Dalits and the Adivasis of Marathwada region of Maharashtra*, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2022.

¹² *Questionnaire in relation to Human Rights Council resolution 53/6 on human rights and climate change*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024.

strengthening HRDs' legitimacy in simultaneously challenging climate harm and caste-based exclusion¹³.

3. Risks and Retaliation

Dalit HRDs face layered and intersectional threats, such as structural exclusion, violence, criminalisation and impunity for crimes committed against them, undermining their ability to safely advocate for a just climate transition.

Discriminatory exclusion from relief and recovery mechanisms is widespread. Dalit women and girls are frequently denied access to cyclone shelters, disaster kitchens and public wells during droughts, due to entrenched notions of 'impurity' and 'pollution'. The NCDHR Drought Report found that in over 100 drought-affected Indian villages, Dalit women were denied water in nearly 50% of cases¹⁴. In Bangladesh, many Dalit girls were subjected to harassment and sexual violence while seeking refuge during climate disasters¹⁵.

Dalit HRDs who challenge injustices are often met with retaliation. In India, water conflicts have escalated into physical violence when Dalits demand equal access. During "water riots" in parts of rural India, Nepal and Pakistan, dominant caste groups have physically assaulted Dalits who attempt to collect water from shared sources¹⁶. In Bangladesh, there have been incidents of dominant groups denying Dalits food and shelter during floods. In Sri Lanka, caste-oppressed communities are often bypassed in land resettlement planning after landslides¹⁷.

Dalit women defenders face the additional risk of gender-based violence in both public and private spheres. For example, Professor Sujatha Surepally, an Indian Dalit woman environmentalist, faced a concerted smear campaign, including public protests and casteist and misogynist online harassment after she criticised industrial pollution in Telangana¹⁸.

Dalit defenders are often subjected to legal retaliation for their advocacy. Dalit activists protesting environmental degradation caused by dominant caste landowners or extractive industries have been arbitrarily arrested on spurious charges, often without formal investigation. In Pakistan, Dalit HRDs have been threatened with being falsely accused under blasphemy laws for criticising local officials' climate response¹⁹.

Structural exclusion is reinforced through documentation requirements. Dalit communities frequently lack land titles, fishing licences or formal housing documentation, which serve as

¹³ *Towards Dalit Ecologies*, Environment and Society, 13, Indulata Prasad, 2022.

¹⁴ *Droughts, Dalits and Adivasis, A Study on the Impact of Droughts catalysed by Climate Change on the Dalits and the Adivasis of Marathwada region of Maharashtra*, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2022.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Seen, But Not Heard, Exploring Intersections – Climate Change Adaptation, Gender and Adolescents*, Dasra and India Climate Collaborative, 2022.

¹⁸ *Ongoing attacks against environmental activists and journalists in India while critics harassed*, CIVICUS Monitor, 2019. Accessible at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/environmental-activists-and-journalists-among-human-rights-defenders-risk-india/>.

¹⁹ *IDSN-EU Submission on Sustainable Corporate Governance, Consultation for an Initiative on Sustainable Corporate Governance*, International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2024.

eligibility criteria for relief, resettlement or climate finance programmes²⁰. As a result, HRDs from these communities are excluded from the benefits of these schemes and face difficulties gaining recognition as legitimate environmental stakeholders.

A lack of disaggregated data collection and availability is a significant barrier. Most government and donor climate assessments in the region do not disaggregate data by caste, rendering the specific vulnerabilities of these communities invisible in policy responses. This absence of formal recognition undermines HRDs' advocacy and creates a vicious cycle of marginalisation²¹.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The climate crisis intensifies existing injustices experienced by caste-oppressed communities in South Asia, threatening environment and livelihoods, and their dignity, rights and survival. Dalit HRDs, particularly women, are at the forefront of demanding an inclusive and equitable response to the climate emergency, often doing so at great personal cost.

A just transition cannot be achieved without dismantling the deep-rooted caste hierarchies that structure exclusion across South Asia. By recognising, supporting and protecting Dalit and caste-oppressed HRDs in climate action, States and international actors can ensure that those at the frontlines of environmental degradation and social exclusion are not left behind.

To ensure the protection and empowerment of caste-affected HRDs working on climate justice, IDSN recommends the following:

Recommendations for States:

- Recognise caste-oppressed communities as a distinct category in climate vulnerability assessments, National Adaptation Plans and State Action Plans on Climate Change.
- Ensure representation of Dalit communities, especially women, in all levels of climate governance, including disaster management committees and resource allocation boards.
- Enforce anti-discrimination legislation in disaster response and environmental governance. Guarantee legal and physical protection for HRDs at risk, including immediate action against perpetrators of violence or harassment.
- Mandate caste-inclusive relief distribution. Issue guidelines prohibiting exclusionary practices during disasters and require periodic audits to monitor compliance.
- Provide land titles, fishing licences and housing documentation to Dalit communities to ensure equal access to climate adaptation programmes.

Recommendations for international and regional bodies:

- Require climate finance donors to collect caste-disaggregated vulnerability data and conduct inclusive beneficiary tracking in all funded projects in South Asia.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

- Facilitate participation of Dalit HRDs in global climate forums, including COP events, regional adaptation platforms and UN environmental assemblies.
- Expand existing environmental defender protection mechanisms to include caste-oppressed HRDs, especially women. This should include funding for legal aid, psychosocial support and emergency relocation when needed.

Recommendations for civil society:

- Climate justice campaigns must integrate caste, gender and class analyses to centre marginalised voices. This includes partnerships with Dalit-led organisations, co-authorship of policy recommendations and equitable sharing of funding and platforms.
- NGOs must work with communities to collect disaggregated data and conduct caste-sensitive needs assessments that can inform both advocacy and programme design.
- Create leadership fellowships, digital safety training and public recognition campaigns to empower Dalit women climate defenders.
- Establish local protection committees composed of diverse community members to monitor and respond to threats against defenders.

Recommendations for donors and philanthropic actors:

- Invest in community-based adaptation projects led by Dalit and caste-marginalised communities, especially women's cooperatives and youth groups.
- Provide flexible, long-term funding for Dalit rights organisations engaged in environmental justice work.
- Fund legal literacy, media training and environmental science education for HRDs from caste-oppressed communities.