



Policy paper

**Challenges in
practice
Environmental
Defenders**

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**TRANSDISCIPLINARY INSTITUTE
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Human Rights and the environment in the EU. Towards an inclusive debate.

Challenges in practice | Environmental Defenders – Policy Paper 5

The last meeting for the project “Human rights and the environment” served as an opportunity to take stock of progress and focus on challenges in practice. The two-day event took place in a hybrid format, attracting many in-person participants and various representatives of social groups engaged in environment-related struggles at the local level.

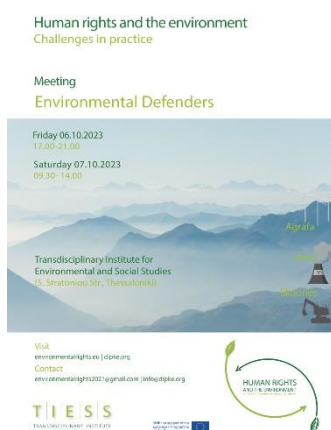


Figure 1. Meeting's poster.

On the first day of the meeting, Asterios Tsioumanis, Transdisciplinary Institute for Environmental and Social Studies (TIESS) provided an overview of the project. He introduced the thematic entities, including on the intersection of human rights, climate change, and biodiversity. He provided a short introduction of the contributors and their research inputs, and opened the project's closing meeting.

A screening of the documentary “Golden Forest” on Giorgos Kalyvas, directed by Stratis Viyatzis (The caravan project), marked the start of the discussion on the controversial excavation of the gold-copper-porphyry deposit at Skouries, located within the Halkidiki Peninsula of Greece.

Giorgos Velegrakis, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, analyzed the social, economic, and environmental dimensions and impacts of mining in Northeastern Halkidiki. He outlined the long-mining history of Halkidiki, including its several discontinuities, and discussed the changes in ownership of the Halkidiki mines in the 21st century. He addressed the mobilization of local environmental activists against the

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project, discussing their exclusion from access to collective goods and resources (e.g., the environmental commons) and the unequal distribution of environmental and social costs precipitated by intensive resource extraction and appropriation of land. He highlighted the need to consider the voices of workers, who depend for their reproduction exclusively on activities and companies that - in the name of development sometimes - lead to extensive accumulation and waste of resources, and the creation of high environmental and social costs. He concluded that the main political problem is to identify, confront, and overcome the many forms of alienation, supporting full and effective participation to the political process where decisions are made over the best route to prosperity and local development.

Alexandra Karina, representing the Megali Panagia Committee, discussed the “struggle for land and freedom” from the local people. She offered an account of the local community’s experience with extractive mining activities in Skouries both in terms of changing landscape and environmental degradation. She reminded participants of local communities’ activities, both protests and organized annual actions, offering rich photographic and video evidence.

Stavroula Poulimeni, Alterthess, discussed the involvement of Alterthess, an independent cooperative journalist site operating in Thessaloniki, Greece, since 2010, as an alternative media source, with the environmental movement in Skouries. Her presentation focused on SLAPPs, also known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, and their impact on environmental movements. She described how independent journalists have been following the local struggle against gold mining, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Poulimeni outlined the SLAPP case against Alterthess, linked to publication of personal data. She concluded that, with the environment under threat from a variety of sources and political



Figure 2. G. Velegrakis addressing his speech.



Figure 3. A. Karina addressing her speech. TIESS, Thessaloniki, 6.10.23



Figure 4. S. Poulimeni during her speech. 6.10.23

figures, we must take steps to ensure that SLAPPs are not used as a tool to intimidate and persecute individuals and groups who are simply exercising their right to free speech and peaceful protest.

Markos Vaxevanopoulos, University of Thessaly, discussed via video the case of garbage burning in Volos, Greece. He outlined the history of policymaking around garbage burning in Greece and the challenges that surrounded it. He discussed the inadequacy of environmental impact studies and related standards, resulting in the current problem in the city of Volos. Vaxevanopoulos addressed refused derived fuels and solid recovered fuels, focusing on garbage burning over the last decade. He discussed actions of the local community against the polluting practice and further focused on police suppression, media coverage, and health concerns, including labor-related ones.

Stathis Douros, representing the Coordination of Volos Associations Against Garbage Burning continued the discussion, focusing on the sociopolitical aspects of the struggles by the local community. He addressed broader social concerns, including energy- and labor-related ones and highlighted the importance of the decision-making process. He noted that environmental issues in Volos vary, including water issues and have deep social consequences. He described main tendencies in local peoples' struggle against garbage burning. Some with a narrow environmental focus, aiming to create an inclusive social front, including mainstream views; others with a focus on juridical processes to promote environmental aims. He then described how social concerns interrelate with environmental problems, and the way forward for participatory decision making.



Figure 5. S. Ntoulos addressing his speech via zoom. TIESS. Thessaloniki 7.10.23

Yannis Maggos discussed the tragic case of Vassilios Maggos, focusing on police repression and brutality linked to environmental activism.



Figure 6. Y. Maggos during his speech. TIESS. Thessaloniki. 7.10.23

Vassilios Maggos was murderously beaten by police officers on 14 June 2020 in front of the courthouse in Volos, Greece, resulting to his death a few weeks later. Yannis Maggos, Vassilios' father, provided an overview of the case and the resulting judicial process. In an emotional address, he concluded quoting some of Vassilios' last public words: "I know that the attack on me was deliberate. I know that they don't care about hitting in front of people and showing off their power...Our ideas, no matter how many of us they kill, will never die, they will always live in the minds of free people. We have been, we are and we will always

be here, against all that suffocates us and prevents us from breathing, against injustice, for the freedom of us all, in every corner of the planet. And may we never win... We will always fight!!!”

Following a break, the discussion turned to the Agrafa region, a mountainous region



Figure 7. S. Zygogianni addressing her speech. 7.10.23

in mainland Greece. Sophia Zygogianni, Athens Initiative for the protection of Agrafa, Struggle Committee of the People of Agrafa, discussed the efforts for the protection of Agrafa in the last six years. She called for increased public participation in environmental struggles, underscoring that “we need to engage meaningfully with the places we live in, our

places of origin and the places we love, to learn about what is threatened and to get involved in local groups and collectives. We can no longer leave the burden of the struggle on other people's backs, nor the blows on other people's backs and sides.” She provided an overview of activities for the protection of Agrafa, drawing attention to increased energy-related challenges.

Nikos Giannakis, biologist, focused on environmental challenges and movements in Western Macedonia. He addressed environmental impact assessments, noting that, despite their sheer volume, they are generally characterised by a high degree of subjectivity in favour of the projects and by their generally low quality. He highlighted the precautionary principle, stressing that “if there remains doubt that it is possible that the ecological integrity of the area may be compromised and that the achievement of the 'conservation objectives' set for the area may be prevented, then it is necessary to refuse to grant an environmental permit for a project. Indeed, the lack of sufficient data cannot justify approval of a plan or project if there are doubts as to its impact.” He further focused on spatial planning for renewable energy systems in Western Macedonia, Greece, concluding that “solutions to the much desired and necessary decoupling from fossil fuels exist, but we cannot use practices that continue to degrade the ecosystems in which we live.”

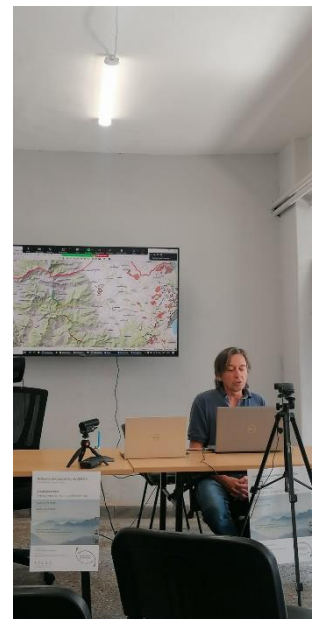
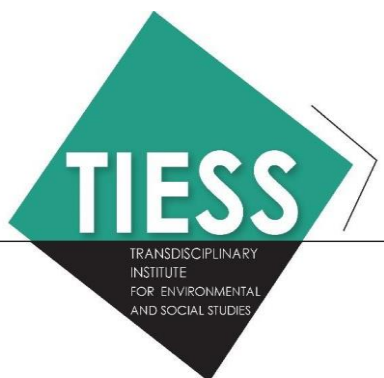


Figure 8. N. Giannakis during his speech. TIESS. Thessaloniki. 7.10.23

In a lengthy ensuing discussion, participants exchanged opinions on all the themes that were presented, focusing, inter alia, on: coordination between local actions for

environmental protection; ongoing legal cases on environmental issues; police brutality against local environmental movements; and the linkages between environmental and social concerns.



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