For more information, contact:
Madiha Qureshi at mqureshi@rightsandresources.org or +1 202 374 0834
Luke Allen at lallen@rightsandresources.org or +1 319 512 8234

ZOOM WEBINAR OPEN TO MEDIA
February 11, 2021
7:00 EST // 15:00 East Africa Time

Webinar will present findings of new study that tracks cases of criminalization of land and environmental rights defenders in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

As demand for land-based investments in East Africa’s fast-growing economies rises alongside rapid population growth, pressures and conflicts over land and the environment are bound to increase. Indeed, land-related conflicts are now a common feature in the region; with disputes often pitting governments, multinational companies and private sector actors against Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Land and environmental rights defenders (LERDs) are often the first line of defense in pushing back against land grabbing, destruction of the environment and other forms of rights violations. For that, they pay the ultimate price, sometimes with their lives. Others are criminalized by the state and sometimes by private actors. This is not helped by the shrinking civic space and democratic rollback across the continent, particularly in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda.

A new report from the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), International Land Coalition Africa (ILC Africa), and Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA) presents a comprehensive review of regional and international instruments for the protection of land and environmental rights defenders in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, with data on cases of violence/criminalization in each country. It analyzes the steps that lead to criminalization, case studies from the three focus countries, and in-depth interviews with 28 land and environmental rights defenders, civil society actors, and government officials. The study also documents strategies to address criminalization and organizations working on local, regional and national levels.

Against the backdrop of efforts to rebuild post-pandemic economies, the webinar will present the report’s findings and bring together prominent voices from civil society, academia and governments in East Africa to discuss what they mean for the future of land-based investment in the region – and for activists defending their rights.

Key findings from the report include:

- Criminalization of land and environmental rights defenders in East Africa is on the rise. As land-based investments, population and urbanization increase with pressure on land resources, tensions will keep rising between states/business interests and communities/Indigenous Peoples.
- These challenges are not matched with equal growth in resources for LERDs, which increases pressure on the few LERDs and organizations defending them.
- Criminalization of LERDs in East Africa involves two main layers of power: those wielding or protected by the power of the state, and corporate/business interests, usually multinational. Infrastructure projects and conservation efforts by governments in the region are also fueling land conflicts and criminalization in the region.
- There is a pattern of instrumentalization of the law and weaponizing justice institutions in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania to crack down on LERDs, including by private commercial interests who have those institutions at their disposal.
- The collective rights of ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples in the three countries are constantly under attack from both the state and business interests and parliaments. Their judiciaries appear incapable of defending them, leaving this task to civil society organizations.
- While strategies and civil society efforts to support LERDs exist in the region, many human rights defenders have limited resources and capacity to sustain efforts to assert their rights.

**WHAT:** A webinar launching a new report authored by RRI, ILC Africa, and OSIEA that tracks criminalization of land and environmental rights defenders in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The webinar will feature perspectives from speakers from civil society, academia, and public sector in the region.

**WHO:** The webinar will feature the following speakers:

- Bernard Baha, Tanzania Land Alliance
- Professor Patricia Kameri-Mbote, School of Law, University of Nairobi
- Richard Mugisha, Independent Researcher on food systems
- Ivan Okuda, Independent Journalist and Lawyer, Uganda
- Patrick Kipalu, Africa Program Director, Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI)
- Audace Kubwimana, Africa Regional Coordinator, International Land Coalition (ILC Africa)
- Joanita Okedi, Economic Governance Program, Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA)

**WHEN & WHERE:** February 11 at 7:00 a.m. Eastern / 3:00 p.m. Nairobi. Register here.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR JOINING:**

Registration is open by Zoom. To ask questions of the speakers in advance, please send questions to mqureshi@rightsandresources.org. Please include your name and organization.

# # #

The Rights and Resources Initiative is a global Coalition of over 150 organizations dedicated to advancing forest, land, and resource rights of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, local communities, and the women within these groups. Members capitalize on each other’s strengths, expertise, and geographic reach to achieve solutions more effectively and efficiently. RRI leverages the power of its global Coalition to amplify the voices of local peoples and proactively engage governments, multilateral institutions, and private sector actors to adopt institutional and market reforms that support realization of rights. By advancing a strategic understanding of the threats and opportunities resulting from insecure land and resource rights, RRI develops and promotes rights-based approaches to business and development and catalyzes effective solutions to scale rural tenure reform and enhance sustainable resource governance.

ILC Africa is a regional platform of the International Land Coalition (ILC), a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organizations working together to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men. The shared goal of ILC’s over 250 members is to realize land governance for and with people at the country level, responding to the needs and protecting the rights of women, men and communities who live on and from the land. IILC Africa has 76 members across 26 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.
The Open Society Initiative for East Africa (OSIEA) supports and promotes public participation in democratic governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights by awarding grants, developing programs, and bringing together diverse civil society leaders and groups. OSIEA seeks to promote open society and to consolidate democratic principles and practices through increased public participation and the creation of a strong institutionalized rights framework. OSIEA seeks to play an active role in encouraging open, informed dialogue about issues of national importance.