

A close-up photograph of a pink lotus flower in full bloom, floating on a body of water. The petals are layered and show a gradient from light pink to a deeper magenta. The water surface is calm with subtle ripples.

Environmental Justice: Corporate strategies to protect communities

corporate
sustainability

Contents

1. Introduction
2. What is environmental justice?
3. What does environmental justice mean for companies operating globally?
4. How can companies ensure environmental justice through corporate strategy and sustainability initiatives?
5. Conclusion

About the authors

Paula Galbiatti Silveira is an Expert Services Manager at Enhesa with a doctor's degree in law. She specializes in supporting companies operating globally making sense of sustainability regulations and ensuring compliance with Environmental, Health and Safety (EHS) obligations.



Marina Dorileo is a Senior Product Manager Lead for Content and has been with Enhesa since 2018, leveraging her legal expertise in environmental law and human rights to drive sustainable business practices. Passionate about human rights and social issues, she collaborates with stakeholders to align content with client needs, promoting corporate responsibility and advancing human dignity across industries.



1. Introduction:

Environmental justice is a concept rooted in the fair distribution of environmental benefits and harms, ensuring that no community — regardless of race, income, or political power — is disproportionately burdened by environmental damage.

For businesses operating globally, environmental justice isn't just a moral imperative — it's a strategic necessity. Companies have the power to either perpetuate or mitigate environmental harm through their operations, supply chains, and product lifecycles.

By embedding environmental justice into corporate strategy, businesses can ensure fair treatment, meaningful stakeholder involvement, and accountability across jurisdictions. This approach not only helps meet compliance obligations but also builds trust, reduces reputational risk, and aligns with international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, OECD Guidelines, and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

In this eBook, Enhesa experts Paula Galbiatti Silveira and Marina Dorileo explore how environmental harm often affects vulnerable populations more severely, including Indigenous people, migrants, and low-income communities. It traces the origins of the term, highlights its evolution to include climate and ecological justice, and underscores the growing urgency of addressing environmental injustice in the face of global challenges like climate-induced displacement.



2. What is environmental justice?

Environmental damage knows no borders.

Although any person can be subject to the effects of environmental harm, it affects individuals, groups or countries unequally. On one hand, vulnerable communities will face the effects of environmental damage more intensely and/or have less resilience to them. On the other hand, communities and individuals living in areas with good environmental conditions will profit from environmental benefits that aren't accessible to others.

What are vulnerable communities?



Environmental injustice is a phenomenon of disproportionate imposition of environmental risks or harms on populations less endowed with financial, political, and informational resources. Environmental justice, then, is the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and harms regardless of peoples' economic or political resources. Thus, the notion of environmental justice implies the right to a safe and healthy environment for all.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) defines **environmental justice** as:

The fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, incomes, and educational levels with respect to the development and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment implies that no population should be forced to shoulder a disproportionate share of exposure to the negative effects of pollution due to lack of political or economic strength.

Where did 'environmental justice' come from?

The term 'environmental justice' was coined in 1987 by Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Sarah and Beverly Wright in the report '[Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States](#)' denouncing the disproportionate environmental harms facing people of color and low-income communities in the United States.





Environmental justice today

Time has, unfortunately, not brought environmental justice for all. A 2023 paper by David Schlosberg et. al. affirm that **environmental injustice is escalating** through **climate-induced displacement** and the clearing of the Amazon forest.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) highlights growing evidence that shows climate change is increasingly driving both internal and cross-border migration, particularly as slow-onset events interact with factors like poor employment opportunities, weak governance, and intercommunity violence.

Additionally, low-income, immigrant, and communities of color are more likely to live near industrial hazards, facing higher exposure to air and water pollution. Poor housing and climate-related risks like extreme heat further increase their vulnerability to serious health issues such as asthma and cancer. Immigrants also face policy-related barriers to accessing healthcare, compounding these challenges.

The expansion of environmental justice

Environmental justice theory and practice has evolved to include not only race, capital, and power, but also elements such as **gender** and **colonization**. Other derivations of environmental justice concern **climate justice** and **ecological justice**.

Climate justice



Mentions go back to the 1980s, where climate change raises issues of inter- and intragenerational justice. Other elements of climate justice concern distribution of the costs and benefits of climate change, procedures for responding to climate changes, and recognition of differences between individuals and communities.

Climate justice movements lobby, among other things, for countries and businesses to account for their share of responsibility towards climate change.

Ecological justice



A non-anthropocentric approach to environmental justice that includes non-human living beings. It was first mentioned in the late 1990s based on the arguments that nature and individual living beings (rivers, mountains, trees, animals) hold rights and are entitled to justice.

[Learn more about regulatory rights for nature](#)



3. What does environmental justice mean for companies operating globally?

Environmental justice might seem like an abstract concept, but it's rooted in concrete situations that reflect a structural inequality in the distribution of environmental harms and benefits between individuals, communities, countries, or species.

These are disproportionately affected by real environmental harms that derive from...



Environmental justice in a corporate context means ensuring that no community, group, or population — especially marginalized and vulnerable ones — bears a disproportionate share of negative environmental impacts resulting from their own operations, products, or supply chains.



For companies operating globally, environmental justice involves asking these questions:

Due diligence	Fair treatment and meaningful involvement	Accountability
<p>Do direct or indirect actions cause environmental harm that affect vulnerable populations?</p> <p>(e.g. pollution, hazardous waste, deforestation)</p> <p>Do stakeholders involved benefit from fair and equitable environmental benefits?</p> <p>(e.g. workers, value chain workers, and affected communities have a healthy work environment)</p>	<p>Are local communities and workers involved in decisions that affect their environment and health?</p> <p>(e.g. obtaining free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous peoples potentially impacted by business activities)</p>	<p>Are we aware — and taking account — of upstream and downstream impacts?</p> <p>(Not just in direct operations, but for products placed on the market and across the company's value chains)</p>

Environmental justice isn't only about minimizing harm; it's also about promoting equity in how environmental benefits and burdens are shared.

Companies operating globally are placed in a privileged position to lead positive impact, ensuring communities across jurisdictions benefit from equal protection from environmental and social harms. They have the opportunity to influence business partners and, through their products, commercialized markets.

How does compliance fit into environmental justice?

Environmental justice issues might seem more abstract to tackle, but from a compliance perspective, they can support businesses to...

1. Understand the problem
2. Identify how their actions are contributing to environmental injustices
3. Develop an action plan to tackle them
4. Assess which practices bring positive impact to people and the environment

Environmental justice often goes beyond compliance, because:

- Regulations in some countries may be weak or poorly enforced
- Environmental justice concerns often arise in low-income or vulnerable communities, such as migrant workers and Indigenous peoples, where legal protections might not reflect real needs
- Regulatory compliance doesn't always account for cumulative or disproportionate impacts
- Compliance with environmental and safety standards doesn't always avoid pollution and accidents

Compliance is only the baseline

Compliance ensures companies meet legal obligations in their operations by setting requisite environmental, health and safety (EHS) requirements, human rights obligations and standards, and by only allowing safe and sustainable products on the market. It's the starting point to any corporate strategy or program that accounts for environmental justice concerns.

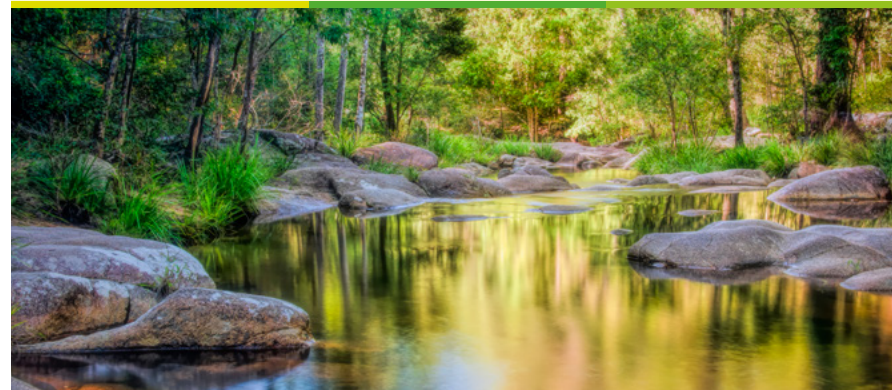
Robust compliance systems that align with **international standards** like the [OECD Guidelines](#), the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), and the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) (UNGPs) provide a framework to address environmental

justice issues more systematically and structurally, going beyond compliance and achieving greater levels of environmental justice.

Actionable measures for environmental justice

There are three key areas businesses should focus on for advancing environmental justice:

1. Conducting due diligence
2. Ensuring fair treatment and meaningful involvement
3. Taking accountability



1. Due diligence

According to the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct](#), "due diligence is understood as the process through which enterprises can identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address their actual and potential adverse impacts as an integral part of business decision-making and risk management systems."

There are several ways that companies perform due diligence in regards to environmental justice...



Environmental Impact Assessments

An **Environmental Impact Assessment** (EIA) helps identify potential environmental harms early on during project development, enabling businesses to prevent or mitigate disasters, minimize negative impacts, and promote more responsible and sustainable practices.



EIAs are also instruments for public participation, ensuring affected communities have a voice in decisions that may affect their health, livelihoods, and environment. By identifying risks and exploring ways to minimize them, EIAs support more equitable outcomes and strengthen accountability from the start.

Avoiding and preventing impacts

As part of environmental and human rights due diligence, businesses are expected to take proactive steps to avoid and prevent adverse impacts before they occur.

This involves systematically identifying risks across their operations, supply chains, and business relationships, with particular attention to historically marginalized or vulnerable communities. Actions to prevent impacts may include...

- Investing in sustainable products and processes
- Redesigns to reduce emissions and pollution
- Adopting cleaner technologies
- Choosing safer alternatives to hazardous chemicals



Due diligence also requires companies to...

- Critically assess the location of operations, avoiding areas where communities are already overburdened by environmental hazards
- Implement inclusive policies that promote the fair distribution of environmental benefits and protections
- Ensure workers, communities, and consumers all share in the gains of sustainable practices

Impact remediation

When due diligence processes identify that harm has occurred, an environmental justice approach demands timely and equitable remediation.

The EU's Environmental Liability Directive refers to environmental remediation as primary remediation which involves restoring damaged natural resources or services at the site of impact to their original condition.

When full restoration isn't possible, complementary remediation can be carried out at another, ideally nearby, location. If there's a delay in achieving full restoration, compensatory remediation may be needed to address the temporary loss of resources and services during that time.

To remedy the environmental harm caused to impacted communities, companies might consider cleaning up pollution, restoring ecosystems, and compensating affected communities for health, economic, or cultural losses.

Remediation processes must be transparent and participatory, with clear channels for communication and feedback. Impacted communities should be actively involved in designing and monitoring remediation efforts to ensure that they genuinely address the harm done and restore environmental and social conditions as fully as possible.

2. Fair treatment and meaningful involvement

Companies have a responsibility not only to avoid environmental and human rights harm, but also to ensure fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all affected stakeholders in their due diligence processes.



This requires active and inclusive engagement with those most at risk from environmental and social impacts, especially marginalized communities, workers across the value chain, and Indigenous peoples. These groups must be given the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their environment, health, livelihoods, and cultural heritage.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a central pillar of environmental and human rights due diligence. Businesses are expected to engage meaningfully with a broad range of actors, including their own workers, supply chain workers, local communities, Indigenous peoples, consumers, civil society organizations, business partners, and investors.

This engagement should:

1. Begin early
2. Be continuous
3. Reflect the needs and rights of those who may be disproportionately impacted

FPIC

A critical element of this engagement is the recognition and implementation of the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of Indigenous peoples.



FPIC is a legal and ethical standard that affirms Indigenous peoples' right to give or withhold consent to any project that may affect their lands, resources, or rights, grounded in international legal instruments such as the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 (1989) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

'Free'

means that consent must be given voluntarily and without coercion or pressure.

'Prior'

means that information must be provided well in advance of any decision or activity.

'Informed'

requires that communities receive complete, accessible, and culturally appropriate information about the activity's risks and benefits.

'Consent'

affirms the right to approve or reject a project both before it begins and throughout its implementation.

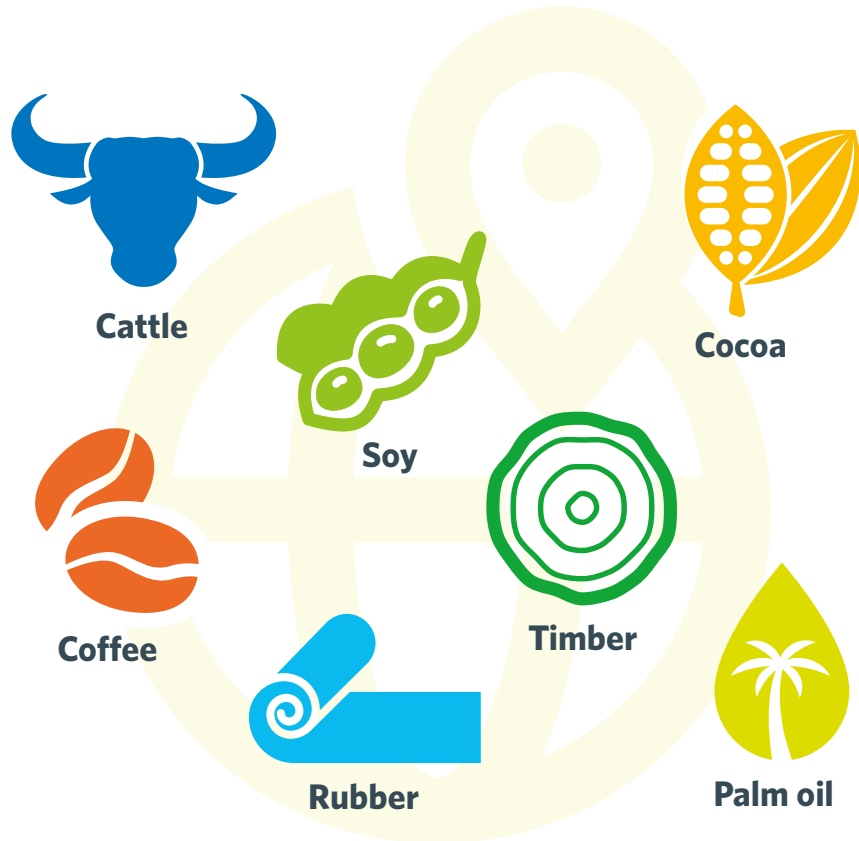


EUDR

The EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) - Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 is a landmark example of how FPIC and broader human rights considerations are being embedded into corporate due diligence requirements.



The regulation aims to reduce the EU's contribution to deforestation and forest degradation by requiring companies to ensure that certain high-risk commodities and derived products are sourced responsibly, namely:



As of 30 December 2025, companies placing or exporting such products on the EU market will need to demonstrate, through a due diligence statement, that these goods have been sourced without provoking environmental harm or degradation and in accordance with the laws of the country of origin, including laws related to land rights and FPIC.

Compliance with EUDR obligations may involve collecting a range of documentation, including:

- Environmental and social impact assessments
- Administrative permits
- Judicial decisions
- Formal agreements with Indigenous communities (to achieve consent where their rights to land, resources, or cultures are at stake)
- Environmental audits
- Land tenure documents

By embedding these practices into their environmental and human rights due diligence frameworks, businesses can not only reduce legal and reputational risks, but also contribute to more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Meaningful involvement and fair treatment helps build trust, strengthen social license to operate, and ensure that environmental protection efforts don't come at the expense of those least responsible for ecological harm.

Environmental justice therefore becomes not just a policy aim, but a lived reality shaped by inclusive, transparent, and rights-based corporate practices.

3. Accountability

Accountability is a foundational element of not only environmental justice but also of a corporate culture that fosters transparency and trust, in which business leaders take ownership of their corporate strategy, decisions, and actions.

Businesses must be accountable not only for the direct impacts of their operations but also for the upstream and downstream consequences across their entire value chain, including the sourcing of raw materials, manufacturing, and the products placed on the market.

How to be accountable

Effective accountability requires robust and accessible grievance mechanisms that allow workers, affected communities, consumers, and other stakeholders to raise concerns, receive feedback, and seek redress. These mechanisms must be transparent, culturally appropriate, and trusted by those they're intended to serve. Crucially, they should be designed to uncover and address environmental injustices that might otherwise go unnoticed.



Creating a safe and open environment for dialogue is essential. This includes establishing confidential whistleblowing mechanisms and ensuring strong protections against retaliation. Workers, community members, and business partners must feel empowered to speak out about risks or misconduct without fear of repercussions. In doing so, businesses can surface issues early, respond effectively, and build trust with stakeholders.

True accountability also means extending these practices across all tiers of the supply chain. Companies must ensure that suppliers and contractors uphold the same environmental and human rights standards, and that the impacts of business activities aren't outsourced or ignored.

Through transparent reporting, stakeholder engagement, and continuous oversight, companies can demonstrate a genuine commitment to justice, equity, and responsible business conduct.



4. How can companies ensure environmental justice through corporate strategy and sustainability initiatives?

By carrying out due diligence measures, engaging effectively with stakeholders, and taking accountability for impacts, businesses can integrate environmental justice into corporate practices and strategy, acting not only sustainably but also responsibly with workers, consumers, and affected communities across jurisdictions.

Let's investigate how businesses can build a coherent strategy that aligns environmental justice with corporate strategy.

1. Strategy

- Integrate environmental justice into corporate sustainability goals by aligning climate, environmental, and social commitments with international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the OECD Guidelines, and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- Ensure equity across geographies by embedding environmental justice principles into environmental, health, and safety (EHS) policies so that all workers and affected communities enjoy the same protections, regardless of jurisdiction.
- Adopt a precautionary and proactive approach to chemicals management, promoting sustainable chemistry and the substitution of hazardous substances even where regulation isn't yet in place.
- Align with international chemicals governance frameworks, such as SAICM and the EU REACH Regulation, to create a consistent, rights-based chemicals policy across the company.



2. Plan



- Design safer and more sustainable products and processes by integrating circularity and efficiency from the outset — prioritizing recyclability, low toxicity, reduced energy and water use, and minimal end-of-life impacts.
- Develop action plans to assess and manage chemical risks across the product lifecycle, evaluating potential exposure and impacts on workers, consumers, and communities.
- Set goals and internal policies for the progressive substitution of hazardous substances and implementation of green chemistry principles across supply chains.
- Map environmental justice risks by identifying where operations may disproportionately impact vulnerable or marginalized groups and plan mitigation measures accordingly.

3. Act and Monitor



- Implement take-back systems and end-of-life strategies to reduce product-related environmental and human health impacts in downstream use and disposal.
- Strengthen EHS systems with disaggregated data collection monitoring impacts on specific groups (e.g. women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, migrant workers) to identify equity gaps and guide targeted action.
- Ensure transparency and safety across the supply chain through lifecycle assessments of chemical use and exposure risks, with a focus on protecting communities and workers.
- Track performance and report on sustainability indicators using credible international standards such as the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

4. Engage



- Foster cross-functional collaboration by integrating sustainability, legal, procurement, HR, and EHS teams into a unified governance structure that supports environmental justice goals.
- Ensure transparent communication with consumers, business partners, and stakeholders through credible labeling and well-substantiated environmental claims.
- Engage communities and stakeholders in identifying and addressing environmental and chemical risks, especially those who are directly impacted by company operations or products.
- Promote inclusive decision-making by involving affected groups in the development and review of EHS and sustainability strategies.



5. Conclusion

Embedding environmental justice into corporate strategy requires a strategic, structured approach from vision to implementation.

By integrating justice and equity into decision-making, planning with intention, acting through responsible practices and continuous monitoring, and engaging transparently with stakeholders, companies can move beyond compliance to become agents of systemic change. This holistic model not only protects human rights and the environment but also builds trust, resilience, and long-term value across the entire organization and its value chain.

By considering environmental justice, companies demonstrate their commitment to people and the planet, creating a link with the community where they operate and do business with.



Ready to start seeing the full picture?

Uncover what's hiding in your products, stay ahead of evolving regulations, and design safer, more sustainable materials — with expert support at every step.

Not sure where to begin?

We can help assess your readiness and create a roadmap — at your pace.

[Ask our experts](#)

Achieve **compliance**, manage **risk**, and drive **sustainability**.