

Statement on the Escazu Convention on the 20th Anniversary of the Aarhus Convention - Carole Excell, World Resources Institute, The Access Initiative

Thank you, Madame Chair, I am here on behalf of the World Resources Institute and the Access Initiative a global network of NGOs working on Principle 10 and the implementation of environmental democracy around the world. This network worked particularly to support the negotiations under the Escazu Agreement. There is a classic phrase that anyone who has worked and studied the Aarhus Convention knows, it's the one stated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who described it as "the most ambitious venture in environmental democracy undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations". On the 20th Anniversary of the Aarhus Convention, we can also now celebrate the adoption of another ambitious venture that of the Escazu Agreement for Latin America and the Caribbean. On the 4th of March in Costa Rica, this year the Escazu Agreement for Latin America and the Caribbean was adopted by 24 countries in the region, the second legally binding regional agreement in the world on environmental democracy. You are no longer alone, you have a sister convention. Escazu is an indigenous word which means resting stone or place. In Latin America and Caribbean which has some of the largest levels of violence against environmental and land defenders in the Globe, we believe this new Convention could provide one avenue to address the level of conflicts that exist over the use of natural resources in the region and on issues of public participation in planning, policy making and projects and access to justice. The agreement is open for signature in September 27th this year. Already Peru and Costa Rica have signaled their intention to sign. The process has legitimacy **and sense of ownership among key stakeholders in the region.**

Like the Aarhus Convention the agreement protects the rights of access to information,

public participation and access to justice in environmental matters. The new treaty includes specific provisions to protect and prevent harm against environmental human rights defenders, ensure there is no impunity and provisions to adopt measures to support vulnerable groups to use access rights. ***However, ratification and implementation of Escazú will not happen without capacity building and support:*** While ratification and implementation by both Latin American and Caribbean countries will be a political decision for many countries in the region they will look inwardly at capacity gaps and realize the provisions of the agreement will require significant reform. Already we have heard words of the need for support for some governments of assistance in legal reviews and reform processes. *I am here to bring the message that we need support from parties to the Aarhus Convention* both technical support, funding and assistance for civil society organizations and networks. The Aarhus Convention has been successfully implemented in the UNECE region and we must celebrate its achievements over its 20 years of existence. There is here in this UNECE region a comprehensive framework and set of experiences which may be useful for the Latin American and Caribbean region. We need to have cooperation and an elevated level of political support for this new agreement also so that we do not reinvent the wheel on many of the aspects of the agreements that mirror each other taken into consideration the different contexts. Whether it is to share country experiences, data platforms, good practices, implementation gaps which can serve as a model to address improvements in environmental governance and successfully implement the SDGs. The importance for environmental democracy, in this global world with global environmental problems is not divided by borders.

I have learnt even today of many projects supported by the EU and others on proactive

disclosure and access to justice that could directly help countries considering signature, ratification and implementation.

We believe we need to build on the valuable support what has been offered during the negotiation of the Escazú agreement by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and especially the Aarhus Secretariat, and other European partners, both Government and civil society who supported us through this process especially Magdolna Toth Nagy from Guta Association and Jerzy Jendrośka from the Compliance Committee and Ella and her team from the secretariat. Please feel free to contact me, The Access Initiative and other partners in our network on how to create a mechanism for bi-lateral, cross regional cooperation or Friends of the Escazu Convention.