

***17<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Working Group of the Parties under the Aarhus Convention***

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***26 February 2014***

First of all, I would like to thank you for this new opportunity to share our regional process for environmental democracy and the achievements to date in this initiative for the full implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration of 1992. We are proud of these achievements but, above all, they compelled us to comply with our international and national commitments and your experience will be very helpful for our regional progression.

As most of you recall, during the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) we proposed to initiate a dialogue on the implementation of Principle 10. This exercise was affirmed in a text signed, at that time, by 10 nations and had, from the beginning, the strong support of ECLAC. In the Declaration, we acknowledged that commitments were needed to ensure proper fulfillment of the rights of access to information, participation and justice regarding environmental issues, and we started a process towards the formulation of a regional instrument to promote their full implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In November 2012, in Santiago, we celebrated the First meeting of the focal points, which also included civil society experts and representatives from international organizations. The participant countries at this first meeting, aware of the challenges, adopted a roadmap to promote a fluid dialogue in close collaboration with stakeholders. The Roadmap also assigned the board –Chile, the Dominican Republic and Mexico—the task of preparing a draft Plan of Action to 2014.

Consequently, the Second Focal Points meeting held in Mexico last April was aimed at adopting the Plan of Action. The adopted Plan sets out a series of tasks such as: promoting the Declaration and incorporate new signatories; strengthening and highlighting the progress made in the region; promoting

the active participation of the public at the national level, and moving towards the formulation of a regional instrument. This last goal, by the establishment of two working groups: one on capacity building and cooperation, coordinated by Colombia and Jamaica; and other on rights of access and a regional instrument coordinated by Costa Rica and Brazil. In addition, we opted for a broad definition of the public so as to achieve the maximum possible participation and inclusion. Therefore, any natural or legal person or community organization can participate in our meetings and receive all information about the process by just registering in the Regional Public Mechanism in the web site of ECLAC.

As part of the capacity building WG, in 2013, two training Workshops were jointly organized in Trinidad and Tobago and in Peru by ECLAC, UNEP, UNITAR, the Access Initiative-World Resources Institute (WRI-TAI), and organizations from the host countries. Additionally, the two WGs are meeting on a continuous basis through virtual meetings supported by the Secretariat.

The Third meeting of the Signatory countries was the first in which the countries were held accountable for the fulfilment of their work and the commitments that they had undertaken. Also, it was the first to be held in the framework of the Plan of Action and was therefore the first in which the participatory methodology had been applied in full.

As a result, we agreed priority action lines in capacity building and cooperation and we approved the vision for our regional instrument. In this fundamental document we stress the linkage between the right to a healthy environment, access rights and human rights. According to the signatory countries, the exercise of access rights contributes to improved environmental protection and, as a result, improved protection for human rights. Also, we recognized access rights are interrelated and interdependent, and so each should be promoted and implemented in an integrated and balanced manner. The document also states that the function of the public should be reinforced at all levels through freedom of access to environmental information, major involvement in environmental decision-making and access to justice. Finally, the signatory countries agreed in the shared vision the seven basic principles: equality, inclusion, transparency, proactivity, collaboration, progressivity and non-regression. At the meeting, the public

expressed its satisfaction with the content of the Lima Vision and its gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the process.

Our plan of action ends in 2014 and we still have important tasks to perform. In these goals, international resources and support, as well as political will, are fundamental if we seek an ambitious result.

Nowadays we have significant input from the documents prepared by ECLAC regarding the current situation, perspectives and good practices on access rights in the region as well as on the typology of international instruments. This will enable us to advance our work. Let me take this opportunity to reiterate my appreciation for the irreplaceable contributions and expertise from ECLAC. Also the Secretariat has provided the Declaration with a website and a public mechanism which has helped bring the subject closer to many individuals and institutions.

The process has also been disseminated in various international forums and has received international support from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the CELAC-EU summit last year and benefited from the contributions from various experts and organizations such as UNEP, Unitar, and of course, the Aarhus Convention. Let me share with you that at our last focal point meeting, we had an International panel that was attended by such figures as Jit Peters, as you know, Chair of the Aarhus Convention and John H. Knox, United Nations Independent Expert on Human Rights and the Environment.

In less than two years since we launched this initiative, I would like to highlight that it has grown in terms of its membership and presence in the international agenda. To date, we have the participation of 17 signatory countries allowing us to potentially benefit more than 500 million people. Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Trinidad and Tobago, Argentina, Guatemala and St. Vincent and the Grenadines joined the commitment initially made by Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic and Uruguay. We hope other nations would join us in the near future. We believe that the more countries will join this effort, the greater relevance and weight will have the mechanisms we seek to agree to promote access rights in our region.

To sum up, we believe that the signatory countries have given a clear political signal. As stated in our common vision, we believe that the adoption of a regional instrument will: facilitate actions and strategies to tackle common challenges; promote dialogue, cooperation, technical assistance and capacity building; strengthen the national application of access rights; and encourage the formulation of a regional agenda on access rights based on sustainability and equality.

But we still have much to do.

We recognize principle 10 as a core element in the post 2015 agenda and a concrete result from Río + 20. A strong environmental democracy is not only the most legitimate way to address both, national and international challenges, but the most effective one. We need not only a better State but an active participation of citizens to achieve sustainable development. With principle 10 in the post 2015 agenda the international community faces a unique window of opportunity for promoting a real dialogue that can allow Latin America and the Caribbean to progress as a whole and to create a regional public good.

At the end of this year we will focus on the nature and contents of a regional instrument, taking into account the reports and outputs of the working group of capacity-building and cooperation. It is necessary to advance progressively towards full implementation of Principle 10 and to avoid taking any step backward, while recognizing the individual circumstances of each country. The instrument must build on the agreements already reached in the region and aim to strengthen national laws or international agreements on the full implementation of access rights, in keeping with the purpose of the Declaration. We must retain the momentum and the political commitment gained so far –your support is therefore invaluable. As presidency, we expect an ambitious regional instrument.

We hope to continue learning about the experience of the Aarhus Convention and to have more opportunities to deepen our knowledge. As we advance in our regional initiative the challenges are more complex and we believe we still have much to learn from your instrument and from the process leading to the Convention.

Thank you very much again for this new opportunity to address you.