

Marianna Bolshakova / Regional Coordinator, Environmental Law and Governance, UNEP.

Aarhus Convention Roundtable, 24 June 2022

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you today during this very important week when the Aarhus Convention is making operational its new mechanism to support the rights of those who defend environmental rights of all of us.

The worsening situation of defenders across the globe is a growing concern of the civil society, the international community, the UN system, and, increasingly, of the ordinary people across the world.

The research of Global Witness indicates that in only 8 years, between 2012 and 2020, 1,540 land and environmental defenders were murdered.¹ And yes, it is Central and South America that leads on this terrible statistic. And so sometimes, in our region, we become complacent in thinking that this is only happening elsewhere. But the reality is different despite clear provisions in international and European law. Across the continent, civil society groups, local communities, activists and journalists are being severely hindered in their ability to speak out about environmental concerns. The methods of pressure on activists and defenders may vary. But they can all be very damaging. They can undermine reputation; create hostile environment through social media; make public interest lawyers spend years in courts, not defending the environment but answering libel charges from companies with endlessly deep pockets and whole teams of attorneys; they can label NGOs hostile agents or unpatriotic citizens for daring to question government decisions; or simply systematically diminish people as peculiar, or strange, and repeat it often enough until those around start questioning their environmental message. This is the reality that some environmentalists face today not only as far as South America, but as close as a few hours drive or a few hours flight from where we are.

Incidentally, the same Global Witness research identified 16 defenders from the UNECE region that lost their lives in these 8 years, of these at least 13 were from the Convention Parties.²

The increasing pressure on environmental defenders is a global problem, with regional specificities.

And it is only fitting that a pioneering procedural rights treaty, like the Aarhus Convention, would step in with an innovative approach.

¹ Global Witness, *"In numbers: Lethal attacks against defenders since 2012"*

² *Ibid.*

Marianna Bolshakova / Regional Coordinator, Environmental Law and Governance, UNEP.

Aarhus Convention Roundtable, 24 June 2022

So, congratulations to us all. But especially the Parties to the Convention who recognized and acknowledged the emerging trend and developed a concrete tailor-made and region-specific solution to address the problem.

While this is a regional endeavor, we see a lot of synergies with the already existing processes. At UNEP, we have been working very actively for the past several years to help examine and address the challenges that defenders face across the globe and to assist them whenever possible.

As you may know, our work on defenders is guided by an internal organizational policy to promote greater protection for them. With its three-pronged approach, the policy provides guidance on issuing public statements on attacks against defenders, including official engagement with concerned Member States; it directs us to implement legal capacity-building efforts for defenders; and mandates us to seek out partnerships to strengthen our. So, as you can see, this is very complementary to the new mandate under the Convention.

Across many UNEP regions, and on the basis of requests from defenders and findings of our assessments, we are strengthening the capacity of defenders and developing knowledge materials on topics such as: protection mechanisms, legal toolkits, national legal developments that have implications for their activities, access to emergency and non-emergency support and, importantly, network building. Defenders are better connected and better protected when they are part of networks. We are also contributing to changing the narrative and perceptions around the work of defenders through highlighting good practices. We would be eager to continue to collaborate with the Aarhus Convention Secretariat, its Parties and, of course the new Rapporteur, to take forward these good practices in collaboration with networks of defenders.

Through the Secretary General's Call to Action for Human Rights, we are also in the final stages of the development of a UN-system guidance to support and protect environmental defenders in all regions, through the UN Country Teams.

But it is only through partnerships and information- and experience-sharing that we can strengthen our own mandate to assist and address matters related to defenders. This is why the discussion today is critical to us at UNEP. Lessons learned, once the rapid response mechanism is operationalized and has gained experience, would be of great interest for other regions. And we are pleased to continue our very long-standing collaboration between UNEP and the Convention to help the Aarhus Community share this valuable experience and to also contribute to the work of the Rapporteur on an ongoing basis.

I would like to end my intervention by noting how very appropriate this development is this particular week, when Member States are discussing a draft resolution recognizing the right to a clean, healthy environment by the UN General Assembly. The draft resolution builds on the last year's Human Rights Council's recognition of this right and, if adopted, there will be significant step forward for both the environment and human rights. So, a great week, all in all.