

**Opening Speech by Karetta Crooks Charles**  
**at the Fifth Negotiating Committee Meeting**  
**Santiago, Chile**  
**November 21, 2016**

It is indeed an honour to deliver opening remarks at the 5<sup>th</sup> Negotiations for a Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters. Although it has not happened at the rate we would have liked, as a Caribbean national I am pleased to see that two new Caribbean countries - Grenada and St. Kitts and Nevis – signed on to the process in 2016. We are aware that this process was scheduled to end in December 2016, however, considering the magnitude of the work left to be undertaken and the need to have more Caribbean countries at the table, we hope that the negotiations will be extended to December 2017, and that countries will use that period to look beyond their national legislation and craft a regional agreement that would be legally binding. This would improve existing or set minimum standards for environmental governance in our region.

The global processes related to environment and sustainable development that the international community has agreed upon in recent times, and that were supported by our nations, such as The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, The Paris Agreement, HABITAT III and Biodiversity, amongst others, integrate civil society participation as central to achieving their individual goals and require an active and informed platform for public participation. The Regional Agreement on Principle 10 will contribute to the establishment of modern frameworks that respond to the developmental challenges shaping environmental governance of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Since Climate Change and the SDGs are more well-known than Principle 10, we call on governments and civil society organizations to show the linkages between P10 and these processes. We need to show that the full implementation of Principle 10, which is people centered, is critical for the achievement of a sustainable future. And in so doing, we should not lose sight of

the fact that both the UNFCCC and the SDGs have their origins in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

All countries currently have in place opportunities for public participation; however, it is often limited to only a few sectors or projects such as forestry, mining or major infrastructure projects.

Only a small percentage of countries provide opportunities to participate early in the process, such as during the scoping or planning stage of projects. Participation has been shown to build trust in decisions made by public officials and offers a path to better, more efficient, inclusive decision making. Properly designed timely public participation where engagement includes meaningful opportunities to inform decisions can not only help avoid costs and reduce risks, it can also increase the understanding of local concerns and establish productive ongoing engagement practices that ensure the benefits of economic development reach the most vulnerable.

Just last week the conservation organization for which I work, the Saint Lucia National Trust celebrated a victory, in that Government announced that the developer of a 700 acre proposed mega project will no longer include in his plans, the Ma kote mangroves, which is a designated Ramsar site. Despite the absence of Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations and after many failed attempts to obtain updated information on the project, the National Trust proceeded to hold meetings with the stakeholders, the community and its members to ascertain their views on the development and its impact on the environment. This is why a robust agreement is needed, to ensure that countries like Saint Lucia and others put the necessary mechanisms in place to facilitate timely access to information and public participation so that the views of those affected by decisions relating to our environment are included in the process in the early stages.

Although environmental defenders in the Caribbean face serious threats, we are fortunate that their lives have not been taken, as is the case in Latin America. This is another reason why this process is important: the constant threats to environmental defenders and the continued failure by individual governments to

enshrine these rights in our laws undermine and threaten the very heart of our democracies and our democratic ideals. When governments agree to and accept this process, it not only upholds our democratic ideals and provides certainty by enshrining these rights in law, but more importantly it provides protection, to those who need it most.

We, therefore, call on governments to take the necessary actions to protect our environment which, if not managed prudently and promptly can affect our economies, the health, livelihoods and the very lives of the people of this magnificent region. We also call on civil society organizations and the public in both signatory and non-signatory states to learn more about Principle 10 and devise creative ways to advocate for its full implementation, our present and future generations depend it.