



**Opening Remarks by Danielle Andrade-Goffe, Elected Representative of the Public (Jamaica), at the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Negotiating Committee for a Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean.**

**Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 31, 2017.**

Thank you to ECLAC and the Government of Argentina for organising this seventh negotiation meeting for the regional agreement on access rights and for this opportunity to make opening remarks.

We, the Elected Representatives of the Public, would like to use this opportunity to share our reflections on the process so far and the possibilities that lie ahead.



This process began 5 years ago in 2012 with the signing of the Declaration by 10 insightful countries – only one country at that time was from the Caribbean. Today we have 24 signatory countries with the most recent addition being St. Lucia –making it the 9<sup>th</sup> Caribbean country to join.

These countries did not set out blindly on this journey to where we are now – we of course had the foundation that is the Rio Declaration. But these countries also realised that a vision was necessary in order to travel the road to effective and meaningful access rights for their people. Recalling the words of the Lima Vision crafted and adopted at the beginning of this process... “that an instrument for Latin America and the Caribbean will contribute to ensuring timely and effective access to environmental information, participation in decisions that affect the environment and access to environmental matters for all.” This Vision recognised:

1. That access rights is important for strengthening and deepening democracy and is essential for governing natural resources;
2. That a right to a healthy environment is important for poverty eradication and preservation for the environment for present and future generations;
3. That it is necessary to promote participation among all sectors of society; and



4. That countries will be guided by the principle to advance progressively towards the full implementation of access rights.

This earnest intention to achieve this vision is reflected even in the progressive participatory rules of the process, being, the election of the representatives of the public, the maintenance of continuous dialogue between these representatives and presiding officers to ensure that the concerns of the public are continually addressed and the freedom of the public to attend the negotiations and to be heard.

As we near the end of this process, we must not falter and we must not fail but remain steadfast in this vision of a better future with progressive standards for the people of our region. It is even more necessary and more important now than ever before. All around us, everyday there is evidence of the need for better implementation of access rights.

In the last five years since we began this journey, social conflicts in Latin America and the Caribbean have been escalating. Global Witness in their new report 'Defenders of the Earth – Global Killings of Land and Environmental Defenders' noted that 200 environmental defenders were killed just last year alone as a consequence of defending their land, rivers and forests from industries. 60% of those murdered were from Latin America. This does not include the countless threats and other act of intimidation meant to stifle voices of opposition. And while we in the Caribbean may not have as many grievous incidences, we are not unaffected. We are all one people because we are equally dependent on this planet we call home. Approximately 16 people died last year while protecting the Amazon forest from logging; the Amazon which we commonly refer to as the lungs of the earth because of the amount of oxygen generated by its lush forests. They should not stand alone when they are protecting the very air that we breathe.

Borrowing the words from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 16 – to obtain peaceful societies we must promote equal access to justice for all, the adoption of inclusive, participatory and representative



decisions that meet the needs at all levels; and we must ensure public access to information and protecting fundamental freedom.

As we begin negotiations this week including on a provision in article 9 to protect environmental defenders, we call upon you to remember the Vision and to let it be your guide. This regional agreement presents us with the opportunity to overcome these false geographical barriers and bridge the gaps in implementation of access rights to ensure that we arrive at a progressive regional standard attainable by all. We do this not by settling for the lowest common denominator but by incorporating the best legislation in the region in the area of access rights and by establishing capacity building partnerships and mechanisms. The public stands ready to support and collaborate positively with the representatives of government in this process to achieve this, our collective vision.

Thank you.