

## CONCEPT NOTE

### FIRST ANNUAL FORUM ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

22-23 November 2022

Quito, Ecuador

**Organizers:** ECLAC, in its capacity as Secretariat of the Escazú Agreement, in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Government of Ecuador, with the support of the World Bank's Human Rights, Inclusion and Empowerment (HRIE) Umbrella Trust Fund.

#### 1. Background information

The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean ("Escazú Agreement")<sup>1</sup> is the first regional environmental treaty in Latin America and the Caribbean and the first in the world to include specific provisions for the protection of human rights defenders in environmental matters.

Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement establishes that each Party shall guarantee a safe and enabling environment for persons, groups and organizations that promote and defend human rights in environmental matters, so that they are able to act free from threat, restriction and insecurity. In addition, each Party shall take adequate and effective measures to recognize, protect and promote all the rights of human rights defenders in environmental matters, as well as take appropriate, effective and timely measures to prevent, investigate and punish attacks, threats or intimidations that they may suffer while exercising the rights set out in the Agreement.

In order to support the implementation of Article 9 of the Agreement, the First Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Escazú Agreement (COP1), held in Santiago from 20-22 April 2022, adopted Decision I/6 on Human Rights Defenders in Environmental Matters<sup>2</sup>. This decision established an open-ended ad hoc working group on human rights defenders in environmental matters, agreed on the elaboration of an action plan on the matter, and decided to hold an annual forum on human rights defenders in environmental matters.

The working group will operate under the leadership and coordination of Ecuador, Chile and Saint Kitts and Nevis. In addition, it will count on the significant participation of the public, especially indigenous peoples and local communities, also endeavouring to include persons or groups in vulnerable situations and with the assistance of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in its capacity as Secretariat.

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<sup>1</sup> Official website of the Escazú Agreement: <https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement>

<sup>2</sup> Decision I/6 available at: [https://acuerdodeescazu.cepal.org/cop1/sites/acuerdodeescazuop1/files/22-00344\\_cop-ez.1\\_decisions\\_approved\\_4\\_may.pdf](https://acuerdodeescazu.cepal.org/cop1/sites/acuerdodeescazuop1/files/22-00344_cop-ez.1_decisions_approved_4_may.pdf)

The annual forum will be attended by recognized specialists in the field, following which a final report will be prepared to serve as input for drafting and review of the relevant action plan to be presented at the second ordinary meeting of the Conference of the Parties.

## **2. Objectives of the First Annual Forum**

The objective of the first forum will be to provide a space for discussion on the situation of human rights defenders in environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, bringing together the Parties to the Escazú Agreement, recognized specialists in the field, and the public, especially human rights defenders, indigenous peoples and local communities, and people or groups in vulnerable situations who defend the environment.

The forum will also serve to raise awareness about the risks and challenges faced by defenders and how the Escazú Agreement can provide a supporting framework at the regional and national levels. At the same time, the forum will contribute to strengthening the capacities and cooperation of stakeholders involved in this matter.

The conclusions of the forum will be reflected in a final report that will serve as input for the preparation and review of the action plan by the working group.

## **3. Methodology**

The forum will be hybrid and will last two days (from 9 am to 4 pm). Simultaneous interpretation Spanish-English will be provided.

The first day will be held in plenary format, where expert panels, round table discussions and selected testimonies will be used to provide a general approach to the topic and take stock of the situation of human rights defenders in the region and existing national and regional initiatives or mechanisms in this area.

During the second day, a focused discussion will be held within the framework of the provisions of the Escazú Agreement and the action plan, where there will be thematic working groups that will report their results to the plenary. Roundtables will be held in person and online in parallel. There will be live transmission of the plenary discussions.

Once the forum closes, an open in-person meeting of the Working Group on Human Rights Defenders in Environmental Matters of the Escazú Agreement will be held to analyze the results of the forum and define the next steps to be taken.

## **4. Main topics to be addressed during the Forum**

In order to achieve its objectives, the forum will focus mainly on the following topics:

- The situation and challenges experienced by human rights defenders on environmental issues in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Testimonies of human rights defenders
- Experiences and best practices in the promotion of the rights of environmental defenders

- Mechanisms for the protection of defenders within the framework of the Escazú Agreement and specific content of Article 9
- Initial discussion on the elaboration of the Action Plan on Environmental Defenders of the Escazú Agreement.

#### **5. Panelists and target audience**

Representatives of United Nations agencies and rapporteurs and other regional institutions, Parties to the Escazú Agreement and countries of the region, representatives of the public, academia, environmental defenders from different sectors and issues, local communities, civil society, national human rights institutions, protection mechanisms, and national public and private institutions will be invited to share their reflections and experiences.

#### **6. Participation and registration**

The first forum will be open to in-person or virtual participation, with the previous registration. There will be limited spaces for in-person participation, depending on the capacity available at the venue of the event.