

July 11, 2018

## **HLPF 2018: Environmental Democracy for Sustainable Societies**

### **Natalia Gomez Peña- Representative of the public in the Negotiation Process of the Escazú Agreement**

Good evening distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

In August 2016, when the negotiating committee met in the Dominican Republic, I had the honor to speak for civil society in the opening ceremony. At that time, I reflected on how the Principle 10 negotiations and the peace talks in Colombia both expressed the aspirations of millions of people for peace and democracy. It was a time of high hope for me, and for many Colombians like me, who have never known their country in peace.

In 2016 the peace accords in Colombia were concluded, but they have not been adequately implemented. The Escazú Agreement should not run the same fate.

In the last two years since the peace accords, Colombia has seen an explosion in the violence against community leaders, human rights defenders and environmental advocates. More than 280 leaders have been killed since 2016.

Sadly, the bloodshed is not unique to my country. Attacks, killings and threats to environmental defenders are multiplying in the region. So often, those who stand up in defense of the right to a healthy environment pay the ultimate price.

But although we may be afraid at times, we will not remain silent. Instead, our voices will come together to express our hopes for a better future for all.

That is why the Escazú Agreement is so important. Because the region needs tools to foster real democratic governance. We need tools to be informed about development projects and the environmental risks we face. We need tools to know about the health of our rivers, our forests, our communities, our children. Because democracy rests on meaningful and inclusive participation where the voice of women, young people, rural communities be heard. That was the promise of sustainable development in 1992: that environmental decisions that affect us would be taken with our involvement. Without it, the Agenda 2030 will come and go as another missed opportunity.

The Escazú Agreement guarantees the rights to environmental information and participation. It also guarantees access to justice for violations of environmental rights. What's more, Escazú is the first international treaty contemplating specific

protections for environmental defenders. And it contains specific standards to safeguard the rights of people in the most vulnerable situations.

But we all know the agreement is just a piece of paper until it enters into force and translates into impact in the lives of millions of people in the region.

Back in Rio+20, countries and civil society began working together to construct an agreement on environmental democracy. Born out of this active dialogue, Escazú sets an example of meaningful ways civil society can participate in international negotiations. For example, the public elected six representatives that coordinated civil society's input, who have reunited under the umbrella of the Access Initiative Network. The public could request the floor at any time, and so our interventions were not token minutes at the end, when no one is listening. In a world where civic space seems to be more restricted every day, Escazú Agreement has set a key precedent to open the space to direct citizen participation.

Now that the agreement is concluded, we are entering a new phase. In it, the good practices for the participation of the public will remain vital to the agreement's success. Indeed, the Conference of the Parties contemplated in Escazú will have an opportunity to strengthen the modalities for public participation in the agreement's governance.

But there will be no Conference of the Parties if the agreement does not enter into force. We therefore urge countries in the region to sign it when it opens for signature on September 27. Now is the time to deliver real steps for real change. It is particularly important that countries experiencing violent environmental conflicts and high numbers of attacks against defenders sign and ratify the treaty in September.

Becoming a party to the Escazú Agreement will signal real political commitment with sustainable development and with the 2030 Agenda. International cooperation should reward that commitment and support action under the Escazú Agreement.

As we gather here today, defenders in our region are still facing violence. Impunity is widespread. Indigenous and rural communities are still experiencing obstacles to exercising their right to participate. Mothers still lack information on contaminants that affect their children's health. But we can change that. Escazú can change that. And the time to act is now. Our region must mobilize and work together to make the promises of Escazú Agreement a reality for everyone.