

Second Signatory Meeting of the Escazu Agreement

Opening Speech

Danielle Andrade-Goffe, Elected Representatives of the Public

Good morning Hon. E.P. Chet Greene, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Immigration and Trade, Antigua and Barbuda, Rodolfo Solano, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship, Republic of Costa Rica, Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, Luis Fidel Yáñez Secretary of the Commission, ECLAC, distinguished delegates and colleagues, ECLAC, and members of the public.

On behalf of the Elected Representatives of the Public for the Escazu Agreement, I wish to extend greetings to you all.

We are particularly happy that this meeting is taking place in a Caribbean country and we congratulate the Government of Antigua and Barbuda for its leadership in hosting the event.

We would also like to congratulate those 24 countries that have signed and those 12 countries that have decided to ratify the Agreement, the most recent being St. Lucia. These countries have taken the critical step to guaranteeing a better future. We are now not only hopeful but also secure in the knowledge that this Agreement will enter into force.

While we are celebrating this fact, we cannot be complacent. There still remains other countries that are eligible to become party to the Escazu Agreement, who have neither signed or ratified. We urge those countries to join the call for a safer and more harmonious framework for access rights in the region. To those Governments, the people in your countries are depending on you.

We are also noting and welcome, the broader support for Escazu in policy making arenas, not only at the national level in many countries but also in various international platforms. And even more importantly on the streets. The everyday people of this world, the people who are making a difference: the

indigenous leaders, the climate advocates, the youth, the defenders of the vulnerable and the marginalised are increasingly becoming more aware of the Agreement and its potential to improve their standard of living.

We are happy that since the Agreement was adopted in 2018, we now have quite a few youth networks involved in the process, including the Caribbean Youth Environment Network.

The Access Initiative (TAI) and ECLAC have collaborated on the Champions of Escazú initiative to recognize leaders that can promote the importance of the Escazú Agreement as well as support its ratification. The first Champion announced was David Boyd, United Nations Rapporteur for Human Rights and the Environment and we now have 5 Escazu Youth Champions: Nicole Becker from Argentina, Sebastián Benfeld from Chile, Kyara Cascante from Costa Rica, Nafesha Richardson, from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Laura Serna from Colombia. Yesterday there was an excellent event - Youth for Escazu- with the participation of young people all over the region. It was inspiring to hear their messages and conviction for changing the world.

Now more than ever it is important for countries to commit to the standards in Escazu – The COVID-19 pandemic highlights new and elevated concerns about decision-making around the environment. Recent efforts to manage the global COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the inequalities in the region: According to a study by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture this year, 32 per cent of the population, or 244 million people, have no Internet access putting them at a significant disadvantage not only in terms of access to education and work but also access to information and opportunities to participate in decision-making.

Latin America and the Caribbean is also one of the regions most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change such as increased extreme weather events: storms, flooding and drought. According to the 2014 Climate Change Vulnerability Index for the LAC region, over 50% of the region's population resides in countries with 'high' or 'extreme' climate vulnerability risks. The poor

and others in vulnerable situations are often more susceptible to these impacts and are also those who have the least capacity to adapt.

At the same time, the region has rich biodiversity supporting 60 per cent of the world's terrestrial life. At the cross section of decision making around the use of these natural resources, are the local communities, often indigenous people, farmers and fishers, who are dependent on these resources for their livelihood. A worrying trend in the region is the high rate of threats, attacks and arrests they face in their efforts to protect the environment and their land rights. Latin America has one of the highest number of recorded killings of environmental defenders globally. Last year, 212 land and environmental defenders were killed, roughly an average of more than four per week making it what some have dubbed: the deadliest year on record for activists. And this year the trend appears to be that those numbers will be far surpassed. One of those killed this year, environmental leader Harlin Rivas, a young Colombian engineering student and member of the National Youth Environmental Network. It is heartbreaking and frustrating to note that even in the midst of a pandemic, environmental defenders are still being threatened and attacked. Until everyone is free to stand up for their fundamental human rights without fear, we can never achieve the sustainable development goals, or our highest ambitions as a society.

This Agreement goes to the heart of the struggle – giving the people the tools to address the issues that affect their health and environment. The Agreement includes provisions for guaranteeing the rights of the public, including persons and groups in vulnerable situations, to a healthy environment and access to environmental information, participation in environmental decisions and access to justice in environmental matters. Detailed provisions outline the minimum standards for procedures for handling requests for information held by public authorities, opportunities for the public to participate in decisions concerning the use of their country's natural resources and for ensuring that there are avenues for redress for breach of these rights and for environmental harm. The situation of the vulnerable and environmental human rights defenders is addressed through requirements for States to implement special measures to

facilitate their ability to exercise their access rights freely and without barriers, threats, attacks or intimidation.

A right to a healthy environment which is one of the guarantees in this Agreement, is absolutely necessary to achieve other human rights. As cited time and time again by human rights bodies and experts, environmental harm can and often does interfere with the rights to life, health, and property, among a vast many other rights. If people have access to environmental information, they can make better decisions to protect their environment and health. If people can participate in environmental decisions, then this improves transparency and generates better and more informed decisions, and if they have access to justice they have the tools to hold those who would violate these rights accountable.

And so, knowing all that is at stake, we look forward to sharing our proposals and providing input into the Rules of Procedure for the Conference of the Parties, Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance and the finance mechanism for the Agreement. We have been conducting outreach with various civil society organisations, environmental networks, experts and the public subscribed to the Regional Public Mechanism for the Escazu Agreement, to obtain input into these proposals. The dynamic and innovative consultative nature of the negotiations has always been a strong feature of the Escazu Agreement which provided every member of the public in our region the opportunity to have a seat at the table and have their voices heard.

Now that we are entering the implementation phase, we need to build on this and not regress. This is an Agreement about meaningful public participation and as they say, if you are going to talk the talk, you must walk the walk. This is why we have recommended strong modalities and opportunities for the public to participate in the Conference of the Parties and subsidiary bodies including the Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance.

And for the public, we have a message. This Agreement is for you. The Agreement's standards on access rights provides the tools for you to use and

to make a difference. In the words of Bob Marley, - Get Up Stand Up, Stand up for your rights!