

**Opening Remarks by Natalia Gómez Peña, Elected Representative of the Public (Colombia), at the 4th 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**

**Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic|August 9, 2016**

Like the vast majority of Colombians from my generation I have not known my country at peace. Since I can remember the reality of Colombia has been marked by armed conflict. Now after more than 50 years of violence, we see a glimmer of hope in the peace process that is about to culminate in Havana, which has the potential to transform the lives of 45 million people and build a better future for the new generations. After a long path of armed confrontation, the government of my country has chosen to bet on dialogue as a tool for change to end the armed conflict. It is a big bet, with a great political risk, but worthwhile if it means that children and young Colombians will no longer grow up in a country at war.



Similar to the peace negotiations in Colombia, this process of regional negotiations that brings us together today also means a commitment to dialogue and building a better future. The negotiation of a regional instrument to encourage the full implementation of the pillars of environmental democracy will transform the lives of millions of citizens and will contribute to addressing the environmental challenges facing our region.

The achievement of sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean demands high standards for access to information, effective participation mechanisms and actions for making access to environmental justice accessible to all people. As civil society, we recognize the goodwill and the great effort that all countries here at this meeting have undertaken to carry this process forward and to make it possible today for us to be at the fourth meeting of the negotiating committee, with the hope of achieving this long awaited regional instrument soon. But we also call for increased efforts to achieve the proposed goal, and that the outcome of this process will strengthen governance standards in our region with the adoption of a legally binding agreement. We encourage more States to express their support in this regard as this will ensure that the governments of all signatory countries pledge to actively work in the effective attainment of the principles enshrined in the agreement to raise the levels of environmental governance in the region.

Peace talks in Havana are teaching Colombia that there is a different way of doing things, that dialogue is the way to resolve conflicts and that there is still hope for a country that has

been dominated by war for years. The world watches Colombia carefully as we focus on building a new country.

Similarly, negotiations on Principle 10 are being observed by the whole world and featured in numerous forums as a good international practice. This process shows that Latin America and the Caribbean need new tools for solving environmental conflicts and that it is possible to dream of a region where the protection of our environment and our resources is not synonymous with threats and the death of our environmental advocates. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the negotiating committee in April we stood in silence to honor environmental advocates who have died in the region. This process is part of the reforms we need to undertake to address this problem and can guide countries to address this situation that threatens social peace in the region. It is therefore necessary that the regional instrument on access rights ensure regional standards for the implementation of these rights that go beyond our national legislation; incorporating dynamic mechanisms for capacity building and exchange of experiences; and that really means a renewed commitment to sustainable development in the region.

Principle 10 gives voice to people so they can participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives and their future. We increasingly see mega-projects and private companies intervening in our countries and we must ensure that necessary safeguards are established so that people do not suffer because of private investment. We need a strong agreement on Principle 10 to strengthen our mechanisms for public participation. We need an inclusive agreement that ensures the rights of all people regardless of race, language, gender or social status. We need better standards, more transparent and fair rules governing the management of our environment.

It is also important that at its foundation the instrument includes environmental education and youth participation as a tool for change. UN figures show that there are 106 million young people in Latin America and the Caribbean, which is the largest number of young people in the history of our region. The new generations are not responsible for the major environmental impacts that we currently face in the world, however, they will be the most affected by its results. Those 106 million young people will be the target audience of regulations on Principle 10 that are being negotiated today, in addition, they will be the policymakers of tomorrow and the future leaders of Latin American civil society. For children and young people in our region we must ensure that the text being negotiated today includes high standards of environmental democracy and constitutes a response to the pressing needs of Latin America and the Caribbean.

As a Colombian, I look forward to the day when the agreement with the FARC is signed and we will start living a new era in my country, with many challenges but with the objective of building peace and ensuring a more inclusive and fair country. As a Latin American, I long for the day when the regional agreement on Principle 10 is adopted and a new stage of strengthening environmental democracy begins in the region.

For our environment, our region, our voices and our future.