

From Resistance to Resilience; Environmental Defenders and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Environmental and human rights defenders are mobilising around the world in the face of different conflicts; stopping megaprojects like huge dams or highways, and challenging established regimes that could have long term



negative environmental and social impacts. Local rights defenders are working to prevent the loss of biodiversity, degradation of ecosystems, contributions to climate change, and the displacement of communities. These voices have come under increased attacks and are often threatened to shut-up or be persecuted, both by the state and commercial power players that have

a vested interest in the development and extraction of natural resources.

The space for civil society to participate in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is constantly being reduced, with governments feeling skeptical about the contribution of different non-profit constituencies. There has been an overwhelming reduction of funds to work on a number of issues within the spectrum of goals, a red flag must be raised that the communities on the frontlines of sustainable development, are being marginalized and excluded in the delivery of the goals.

Among this diverse group of indigenous leaders, minorities, youth, women, and land-right defenders there are different challenges that threaten their basic human rights. Therefore, it takes courage to reach out and start a movement, which sometimes requires putting your life on the line. The growing dangers that rights defenders face ranges from harassment, arrest, assault, and murder. Many of the attacks go unprosecuted and the assailants are allowed to act with impunity.

The Escazú Agreement

The Escazú Agreement adopted on March 2018 is a regional agreement for Latin-America and the Caribbean, that has the aim to guarantee access rights for the population; access to information, access to public participation and access to justice on environmental issues. The agreement carries the spirit of land right defenders and understands that marginalized communities are the ones most affected by negative environmental and social practices, having little or no chance of confronting projects that may change their communities and ways of life forever.

The Escazú Agreement brings hope to the region where the biggest number of HRED murders are taking place, with the aim to reduce the number of murders drastically by having states guarantee the rights of any person that feels the need to address issues that threaten the environment. Enshrined in the agreement would be a commitment to allow the public to access information about natural resource development and extraction a transparent way, facilitate participation in decision making and most importantly provide justice mechanisms for when state and commercial activities have negative impacts on communities and access to communal resources.



The fate of the Agreement lies on the commitment and responsibility of the governments of Latin-America and the Caribbean hoping that at least 11 States sign and ratify it, in order for the Agreement to enter into force. A special ceremony is being planned to take place on September 27 during the next UN General Assembly for this particular matter.

In case the Escazú Agreement enters into force it may turn out to be a game changer in a region where *extractivism* has become a major driver of poverty, especially in rural areas where people are often less able to exercise their rights due to a lack of political presence. The Agreement aims to address environmental issues in a holistic way, by recognizing the functions and importance of the different components of the ecosystem including its inhabitants.

Civic space and the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals

At the 2018, High Level Political Forum, 40+ countries shared their Voluntary National Reports (VNR) in the implementation of the sustainable development goals. The CIVICUS Monitor produced a [comparative civic space index](#) for these countries, which found that there are is a lack of civic space in a majority of these countries for civil society and rights groups to participate in the delivery of the goals.

A toolbox to enhance the implementation of the Agenda 2030

During the Conference of the Earth in Rio 92 it was made clear that governments alone cannot achieve sustainable development without an active participation and engagement of civil society, nevertheless the challenges that civil society faces in order to have a more meaningful participation within the process are constantly growing and in that sense it is important that civil actors are aware of a number of tools that have been developed in the last decades in order to guarantee everyone's participation in the achievement of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.



In this sense, several organizations under the umbrella of the NGO Major Group are working to detect how civil society participation can be more effective, by identifying and developing tools to increase civil society participation. As a result of months of organization, a side event was put together where a rich discussion took place under three work streams: a) Policy development

b) Application of the interlinkages principle and c) Influencing crosscutting issues. Consequently, challenges and alternatives are being identified in order to have an ongoing work in unity and solidarity toward next HLPF2019 where the theme would be “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”.

There is a growing urgency to strengthen UN and other intergovernmental frameworks that allow more voices to be included and heard. This can be done by guaranteeing more participatory processes not only during the annual UN High Level Political Forum but also at a national level. Contributions should be recognized no matter how big or small, of any civil actor and especially include those struggles that aim to achieve bigger common goals.