



CARIBBEAN ENVIRONMENTAL
DEFENDERS NETWORK



OFFICIAL SIDE EVENT

Report

V I R T U A L S I D E E V E N T

Recognising, supporting and promoting Environmental Defenders in the Caribbean

23/04/2026

Hosted by Elected Representatives of the Public to the Escazú
Agreement with support from CANARI and the Caribbean
Environmental Defenders Network

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Background

On 23 April 2026, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) in collaboration with the Caribbean Elected Representatives of the Public under the Escazú Agreement, with support from the Caribbean Environmental Defenders Network, hosted the side event *Recognising, supporting and promoting environmental defenders in the Caribbean* during the Fourth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP4) to the Escazú Agreement in Nassau, The Bahamas.

The event brought together approximately 86 participants from across the Caribbean, including civil society organisations, community leaders, environmental defenders, legal practitioners, government representatives and members of the Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance (CSIC) of the Escazú Agreement. The session aimed to increase understanding of the lived realities of environmental defenders in the Caribbean, explore the threats and challenges they face and identify practical recommendations for strengthening recognition, protection and support mechanisms in the region. The discussion also contributed to ongoing regional efforts to document the experiences of environmental defenders and inform implementation of Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement.

Opening remarks and context

The event opened with reflections on the significance of the Escazú Agreement as the first international treaty to include specific provisions for the protection of human rights defenders in environmental matters. Participants were reminded that despite growing recognition of environmental defenders globally, there remains limited awareness within the Caribbean of who environmental defenders are, the important role they play in protecting environmental rights and the challenges they face.

Speakers highlighted that environmental defenders in the Caribbean are often under-recognised and that there is a widespread perception that serious threats and reprisals do not occur in the region. However, limited documentation does not necessarily indicate an absence of risk. Rather, it points to a significant evidence gap that must be addressed to better understand and respond to the realities faced by defenders.

Participants were also introduced to the Escazú Action Plan on Human Rights Defenders in Environmental Matters (2024–2030) and ongoing efforts to prepare both an official regional report and an independent People's Report documenting the experiences of environmental defenders across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Voices from the frontline

The central feature of the event highlighted perspectives from environmental defenders representing several Caribbean countries, including Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Jamaica and Suriname. Their contributions illustrated the diverse forms that threats and intimidation can take, while revealing common patterns across national contexts. Defenders described experiences ranging from reputational attacks and public discrediting campaigns to legal intimidation, economic pressure and social exclusion.

Participants heard examples of environmental advocates being labelled as anti-development, anti-government or obstacles to economic progress. These narratives highlighted how environmental advocacy is frequently framed as opposition to development, rather than as a legitimate effort to safeguard environmental rights, ecosystems and community wellbeing. In doing so, environmental defenders and civil society organisations are often denied recognition as important contributors to sustainable development.

A recurring theme was the use of institutional and systemic forms of pressure. Rather than overt violence, many defenders described experiences where their access rights were delayed or denied through slow responses to information requests, limited access to environmental information, exclusion from decision-making processes and legal actions that discouraged public participation and advocacy.

“...Speaking out on environmental issues is often quiet... it's not always dramatic, and it's not always openly hostile, but it shows up in different ways.”

Several speakers highlighted the challenges faced by communities seeking to raise concerns about environmental impacts associated with large-scale developments and extractive activities. Participants heard that individuals and communities may be reluctant to speak publicly due to concerns about personal safety, social repercussions, employment consequences or damage to community relationships.

“Communities themselves are often too afraid to speak.”

The discussion also underscored the particular realities of small island contexts. Participants noted that environmental defenders often live and work within close-knit communities where political, social and economic relationships are highly interconnected. As a result, speaking out can carry significant personal and social costs, including strained relationships, ostracism and reputational harm.

“When you live in these small societies, and you get labelled as anti-development, misinformation, anti-government, you're against the people... we're troublemakers... These labels have implications.”

Another important issue raised was the impact of environmental advocacy on livelihoods. Defenders described situations where individuals may self-censor or limit participation in advocacy efforts because of concerns about employment security or economic repercussions. This highlighted the need to consider economic vulnerability as an important dimension of defender protection.

Across all interventions, participants emphasised that environmental defenders are frequently advocating not only for environmental protection but also for transparency, accountability, access to information, participation in decision-making and the protection of human rights – the right to a healthy environment.

Discussion and reflections

The discussion that followed demonstrated the extent to which the experiences shared by defenders resonated across the region. Participants reflected on the similarities between the challenges described and issues being faced in their own countries and communities.

A recurring concern centred on the role of the state in relation to environmental defenders. Several participants questioned what avenues for protection exist when state institutions themselves are perceived to be sources of pressure, intimidation or exclusion. This prompted discussion on the importance of independent accountability mechanisms, regional solidarity and access to international human rights processes.

“The role of the state as both the entity that should be facilitating and promoting the protection of defenders is in many cases the source of the pressure against environmental defenders.”

Transparency and access to information emerged as another prominent theme. Participants emphasised that access to environmental information should be treated as a fundamental right rather than a privilege, noting that many environmental conflicts stem from a lack of transparency, inadequate consultation and barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making.

Participants also highlighted the value of regional and international networks in supporting environmental defenders. Discussion focused on the role of regional courts, the Inter-American human rights system, United Nations mechanisms and transnational civil society networks in providing visibility, solidarity and avenues for redress where national systems may be inadequate.

Finally, several participants underscored the importance of public education and awareness of environmental rights. Building community understanding of legal rights, environmental governance processes and available avenues for participation was seen as an important strategy for strengthening resilience, reducing isolation and supporting environmental defenders at the local level.

What the research shows: preliminary highlights from the CSIC study on protection mechanisms for environmental defenders.

The side event also featured a presentation on preliminary findings from ongoing research commissioned by the Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance of the Escazú Agreement examining protection mechanisms for environmental defenders across Latin America and the Caribbean.

The research highlighted that while violence against defenders in the Caribbean may be less visible than in some other regions, environmental defenders nevertheless face a range of threats, including reputational attacks, intimidation, economic pressure and efforts to undermine the legitimacy of their work.

A key finding was the limited availability of dedicated protection mechanisms for environmental defenders within Caribbean countries. Many defenders are unaware of where they can seek assistance or lack confidence in existing institutions. At the same time, there is limited awareness among institutions themselves regarding the role and needs of environmental defenders.

The research identified several areas requiring further attention, including improving documentation and data collection, increasing awareness of available support mechanisms, strengthening institutional capacity and enhancing access to regional and international avenues for protection and redress.

Participants also heard examples of protection frameworks and rapid response mechanisms that have been established in parts of Latin America, providing useful lessons for future implementation efforts within the Caribbean.

Key recommendations

Several recommendations emerged from the discussions:

1. **Increase recognition of environmental defenders**
Participants emphasised the need for greater recognition of environmental defenders and their role in protecting environmental rights, supporting accountability and contributing to sustainable development. Increased awareness is needed among governments, public institutions, media organisations and the wider public regarding who environmental defenders are and the legitimacy of their work.
2. **Strengthen documentation and evidence gathering**
The lack of documented evidence on threats, intimidation and reprisals against environmental defenders was identified as a major gap. Participants stressed the importance of documenting experiences, collecting data and creating safe channels for defenders to share their stories. Initiatives such as the People's Report were recognised as important opportunities to strengthen the evidence base and inform policy and advocacy.
3. **Develop accessible protection mechanisms**
Participants highlighted the need for clear, trusted and accessible mechanisms through which environmental defenders can report threats and seek assistance. This includes strengthening institutional capacity to respond to complaints, undertaking risk assessments and developing appropriate protection measures that reflect Caribbean realities.
4. **Strengthen implementation of access rights**
Many of the challenges described by defenders were linked to barriers to accessing environmental information, participating in decision-making and obtaining justice. Participants emphasised the need to strengthen implementation of these access rights and improve transparency, accountability and public participation in environmental governance.
5. **Expand legal and financial support for defenders**
The use of legal intimidation, strategic litigation and economic pressure emerged as a significant concern. Participants highlighted the need for greater access to legal assistance, including pro bono legal support, as well as mechanisms to reduce the financial risks associated with defending environmental rights through legal processes.
6. **Strengthen regional solidarity and international support networks**
The importance of regional collaboration was repeatedly emphasised. Participants highlighted the value of regional and international networks, human rights mechanisms, courts and solidarity platforms in providing visibility, technical assistance, advocacy support and protection for defenders facing threats or isolation.

7. Build awareness of environmental rights and civic participation

Participants noted that many people remain unaware of their environmental rights and available avenues for participation. Increased public education and capacity building were identified as important strategies for empowering communities, strengthening civic engagement and supporting environmental defenders.

8. Develop Caribbean-specific approaches to defender protection

Participants recognised that environmental defenders in small island states face unique challenges, including close-knit social networks, economic dependence and limited institutional capacity. Protection measures should therefore be tailored to Caribbean contexts and informed by the lived experiences of defenders across the region.

Conclusion

The event highlighted that environmental defenders in the Caribbean face a range of threats and challenges that remain under-recognised and insufficiently documented. While experiences differ across countries and contexts, common patterns emerged relating to reputational attacks, social exclusion, legal intimidation, economic pressure and barriers to participation in environmental decision-making. The discussions reinforced that the Caribbean is not exempt from the challenges faced by environmental defenders globally. Rather, many of these realities have remained largely invisible, undocumented or normalised.

Participants emphasised that environmental defenders play a critical role in promoting transparency, accountability, environmental sustainability and the protection of human rights. Far from opposing development, environmental defenders help to ensure that development is sustainable, equitable, accountable and respectful of environmental rights and community wellbeing. Strengthening recognition, protection and support for environmental defenders is therefore essential for the effective implementation of the Escazú Agreement and for advancing environmental democracy across the Caribbean.

The event also underscored the importance of moving beyond awareness towards action. Participants highlighted the need for stronger documentation, accessible protection mechanisms, greater awareness of environmental rights, legal and institutional support and stronger regional solidarity. Ensuring that environmental defenders can carry out their work safely, effectively and without fear of retaliation will require coordinated efforts from governments, civil society, regional institutions and international partners. The experiences shared during the session provide an important foundation for informing future action under Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement and strengthening support for environmental defenders across the Caribbean.