



Caribbean Freedom of Information Network launched at Landmark Conference

*11 Caribbean Countries including Saint Lucia Meet to Discuss Freedom of Information
Laws in the Region*

KINGSTON, JAMAICA – For the first time, Caribbean governments and civil society have come together to discuss access to information, public participation in governance, and access to justice at a landmark conference held in Kingston, Jamaica. Representatives from 11 Caribbean countries attended the “*Regional Conference on Freedom of Information in the Caribbean: Improving Management for the Environment.*”

At the close of the two-day conference on March 21, 2013, governments, civil society, and media announced the decision to launch a Caribbean network on freedom of information (FOI) to support processes to improve standards for access to information in the region.

Dr. Carolyn Gomes, chairperson of the Access to Information Advisory Stakeholders’ Committee and Executive Director of Jamaicans for Justice (JFJ) said, “freedom of information is the most powerful tool for ordinary citizens to arm themselves with the information they need to change their lives. Launching this freedom of information network will build opportunities for collaboration, learning and capacity building among information commissioners, civil society and media across the region.”

Countries reviewed the status and effectiveness of freedom of information laws, the number of requests for information being made in each country, and institutional structures for implementation and enforcement. Jamaica is one of seven Caribbean countries (Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the Cayman Islands) to have freedom of information laws in force. Five countries have draft laws pending, and Bahamas and Guyana have passed laws but they are not yet in force. Gaps in implementation were noted in Belize, Antigua, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which have laws that have not yet fully been utilized by the public.



“Freedom of information laws ensure that citizens can access official documents from their governments and gives them a voice in decisions that directly impact them and the environment,” said Danielle Andrade, Legal Director of the Jamaica Environment Trust. “Using Jamaica’s Access to Information Act, we were able to obtain documents to build our legal case to compel the government to fix a non-functioning sewage treatment plant in Harbour View, Kingston.”

The event was a follow-up to the Rio+20 sustainable development conference in May of 2012, where ten countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) signed a declaration to work towards a legally binding, regional instrument to promote the implementation of the rights of access to information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental matters. Jamaica was the first Caribbean country to sign the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) Declaration on Principle 10, and Trinidad and Tobago joined in 2013.

“The LAC Principle 10 regional declaration is a game changing opportunity for the region,” said [Carole Excell](#), Senior Associate at the World Resources Institute. “Caribbean governments need to embrace new regional approaches that seek to improve transparency, reduce conflicts over environmental decisions, and build capacity to implement new rights for citizens.”

The Saint Lucia National Trust, Communications and Advocacy Officer, Karetta Crooks Charles said, “it was inspiring to see how ordinary citizens, civil society and the media from fellow Caribbean countries were utilizing the FOI/Access to Information laws to hold public authorities more accountable. Furthermore, it is hoped that Saint Lucia will follow suit and ratify its draft FOI Act of 2009, as well as sign on to the LAC Declaration on Principle 10 which promotes sustainable development through access to information, public participation and access to justice.”

Michelle Fife, Legal Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of St. Vincent and the Grenadines stated, “this is a positive initiative which brings the region together on an important issue. Transparency is important to our government. With continued work we will build and strengthen our institutional capacity to improve access to information.”

The conference was funded by The Commonwealth Foundation, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Information Commissioner’s Office of the Cayman Islands. Organizers included the Jamaica Environment Trust (JET), [World Resources Institute](#) (WRI), The Access Initiative (TAI), Jamaicans for Justice (JFJ), The Mona School of Business and Management, and the Access to Information Unit of Jamaica.

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