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La participación de la investigadora de la Universidad Autónoma Latinoamericana -UNAULA, la Dra. Catalina Vallejo Piedrahita, en el diálogo interactivo de la ONU para conmemorar el Día de la Madre Tierra, demuestra el compromiso de la Institución con el medio ambiente y la sostenibilidad.

Durante el diálogo, se presentaron visiones y propuestas para lograr una armonía con la naturaleza, abandonando la visión antropocéntrica y promoviendo la integración equilibrada de las dimensiones económicas, sociales y ambientales del desarrollo sostenible.

Es importante destacar que, la participación de la Dra. Vallejo Piedrahita en este diálogo interactivo de la ONU para conmemorar el Día de la Madre Tierra, es un logro para la Institución y una oportunidad para dar a conocer el trabajo de investigación que se está llevando a cabo en UNAULA, en relación con el medio ambiente y la sostenibilidad.

**12th Interactive Dialogue of the General Assembly on Harmony with Nature to  
Commemorate International Mother Earth Day - 24 April 2023**

**Panel 2. On the Scope of an Earth Assembly**

**Catalina Vallejo | Professor of Public International Law at Eafit University**

Thank you for giving me the floor.

I speak today in my role as an academic. I teach international law at Eafit University and conduct research on the rights of Nature at UNAULA university, both in Colombia. I am involved in a research project called Riverine rights, funded by the Research Council of Norway, where together with an international team of scholars we study recent developments on the rights of the Atrato river in Colombia, The Ganga and Yamuna rivers in India, and the Whanganui River in New Zealand, all recognized back in 2017.

Similar to the experience of Brazil, just mentioned, Colombia's social movements also have a long history of struggles to advance socio economic and cultural rights. On this occasion I would like to emphasize the importance of the Colombian Constitutional Court's ruling of 2016, which declared a violation of biocultural rights in the Atrato River basin. This historic decision was the result of socio-economic rights litigation. It recognized the Atrato River as a subject of biocultural rights, including the rights to protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration. The court acknowledged the close relationship between the river and the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities that rely on it for their livelihoods, cultural identity, and spiritual well-being. The ruling affirmed the need to protect the river and its ecosystems as part of the broader effort to safeguard the human rights of ethnic communities and promote environmental protection in Colombia.

Despite the court ruling and six years having passed since the implementation process began, the Atrato River and its communities still face significant challenges in executing the decision and its structural remedies. The illegal mining of gold and sand continues, leading to a social and ecological crisis that has polluted the river and made the ethnic peoples of the Chocó region extremely vulnerable to illness and violence. However, all stakeholders we have interviewed in our fieldwork have positively evaluated the ruling.

It is widely accepted that the decision has brought new insights to this long-standing crisis, new attention to the river itself, and is gradually establishing fresh channels of communication between the Atrato communities and the national government of Colombia. In my opinion the paradigm of biocultural rights has the potential to start influencing changes in the administrative structures that constrain the full implementation of rights of Nature rulings and laws in various countries.

Perhaps the most significant step forward is the establishment of a Commission of River Guardians, consisting of 14 representatives of the ethnic communities (elected with gender

parity) and one representative of the national government, who sits at the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. The work done by this Committee is very significant, especially considering that the community guardians are not funded or employed by any public institution, which underscores the challenges that they face in carrying out their work.

Through my research on environmental law, like many of my colleagues, I have come to realize that a more relational, integral, and systemic approach to the legal protection of Nature and people is necessary. This approach recognizes the interdependency between humans and ecosystems and emphasizes ancestral and traditional local values for environmental protection.

While our research on Riverine Rights is ongoing and we are yet to reach conclusions on the effectiveness of recognizing Nature's rights for better environmental protection, it is evident that ecological perspectives on law draw attention to environmental issues in a new and quite influential way. We have found that the effective participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes related to environmental governance, including Indigenous, Afro descendant, and farmers communities, is essential for local and global environmental protection.

Therefore, I call for increasing international dialogue on the importance of widening existing environmental law norms to include ecological and participatory approaches. There is a transnational influence between rights of Nature declarations and Nature's guardians around the globe. This way of thinking and governing relations with the environment is growing fastly. Thus, it is necessary to continue researching rights of Nature cases to understand how they can improve environmental protection and human rights globally.

An Earth Assembly next year and a continued UN effort would be an adequate forum for this dialogue. Academics and researchers from all disciplines have a crucial role to play in this effort, by engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration, and actively participating in debates at the national and international level. From our own capacities, let us join the efforts of ecosystem guardians across the globe, and imagine a United Nations Earth Assembly that becomes a guardian for Nature, which, at the end of the day, is the basis for the enjoyment of all human rights.

Thank you for your attention.