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# Public Participation in Environmental Issues

SEÑOR DIEGO GALLEGOS

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The good news from Argentina is that a recent listing of non-governmental organizations in the country exceeds 700 names. The bad news is that 680 of those organizations are not functioning. This is a cautious beginning for someone who is here today as a representative and spokesman for non-governmental organizations and who wishes to address the lack of public participation regarding environmental issues.

All of the presentations today have been focused on the role of governmental organizations or industries. The people are an important third factor in the environmental equation. The people definitely understand environmental issues. Unfortunately, they are not involved in the processes discussed here. I believe that responsibility for the development and conservation of nature has to be directed more towards the common man.

Not only are people not involved in the resolution of environmental issues, they also do not trust the political process as being interested in resolving them. For this reason, it is extremely important that non-governmental organizations, which are close to the people, yet interested in participating, be involved in the environmental system. By so doing, government and industry can involve, and benefit from, public participation and, eventually, public support.

Let me leave you with an example. My organization, the Orthonological Association of Plata, became involved with a controversy involving 15,000 drums of oil stored in Patagonia. We dealt with one particular company, responsible for

half of them. The controversy arose when large numbers of birds fell into the open drums, causing an extraordinary stir in the media. The people, at that point, were enraged. They reacted with concern, anxiety, and anger and wanted to become involved.

The combination of the media's reaction and the people's dramatic response caused industry representatives to fall silent, under attack. At this point, our organization became involved and played an important role in mediating the controversy between the people and the industry, using the law as our guide. The oil industry agreed to full disclosure and showed us everything that they could, so the facts would be known. This shed reality on the press reports and lowered the anxiety level by putting rumors to rest. Some of the facts reported previously were erroneous, some were correct and some were more serious than stated.

Because of our role, industry's cooperation and the full disclosure of the facts, a climate was created within which a resolution could occur. We developed a cooperative plan which ultimately led to the matter's resolution.

This example shows that non-governmental organizations can play an important, perhaps critical role as a mediator between the people, industry and the government. They can, if encouraged and allowed to participate, achieve positive interaction to improve the process of creating and enforcing environmental regulations.

A framework law for Argentina should follow this path and this mechanism should be incorporated into the legal system. Perhaps this will be difficult to do in our culture, but I believe it is the most productive path we can follow. In this respect, I am optimistic for the future; there are effective solutions.