Sonia Montenegro has more than 30 years of experience in development programs. Throughout her professional career, she has held a wide range of positions related to project and general management, institutional development, international and government relations, marketing, and communications. She served in different capacities at several Panamanian environmental non-governmental organizations, a selection of governmental and economic organizations including the Chamber of Commerce,

Industry and Agriculture of Panama, Red de Reservas Naturales Privadas (Private Land Owners), ANCON –Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza, Presidency of the Republic of Panama-National Bureau of Science and Technology (SENACYT), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and at the Embassy of Japan in Panama.

Sonia holds a degree in International Relations from University of Panama, an MBA from Santa María La Antigua Catholic University, a Project Management degree from the University of Louisville, and studies with Partners in Global Governance at the Diplomatic Academy of the Republic of Germany.

1. **Please introduce yourself and the work of CIAM.**

The Environmental Advocacy Center (CIAM) is a non-profit organization working in Panama since 2007. Before CIAM came into existence, major Panamanian environmental groups and activists had never ventured into legal accountability. CIAM was created to fill this major gap. Today, with an outstanding record of success, CIAM is the only environmental NGO in Panama harnessing the power of law to protect people and the environment. CIAM’s Board of Directors is comprised of a group of prestigious Panamanians widely known for their uncompromising integrity and commitment to the environment and human rights. In addition to the experts on environmental law, all members are independently recognized for being ahead of the curve in their respective fields.

As Executive Director, I am responsible for articulating CIAM’s strategy, as well as directing and coordinating actions, activities, and internal processes, in addition to those external to the organization. I monitor local developments in Panama’s environmental agenda and maintain international contacts with partner organizations and potential funding sources. I also represent the organization at public events.

1. **How long have you been a TAI partner?**

CIAM has been a TAI partner since 2009. Since its inception in 2007, CIAM has worked to introduce the concepts and advocacy of access information in Panama. In 2009, CIAM took part in the first meeting in Panama to introduce the access to information and public participation. In 2010, CIAM had its first meeting with World Resources Institute representatives and, in 2012, CIAM began taking part in TAI meetings.

1. **What does it mean for your organization to be part of the TAI network?**

It is a significant distinction for CIAM to become part of The Access Initiative. The issues addressed by TAI are many of the same issues that are part of the everyday work of CIAM. Our organization is able to make tools available to the communities we serve, thanks to our interaction with The Access Initiative. This makes our organization more efficient and effective.

1. **What access rights do you address? How do you address them?**

We work mostly on freedom to access to information lawsuits pertaining to environmental issues. Most of this litigation is directed towards national and local government authorities and the decision-making processes affecting local communities.

1. **Please give a brief overview of the current projects CIAM is working on.**

CIAM has been working in environmental legal defense in several cases, with the following results:

Cuprum: CIAM brought this case to the Supreme Court, arguing that this open pit mining concession had been granted in violation of Panama’s public participation law. The Court agreed and ordered the concession be cancelled. This action established a legal precedent which should influence how the laws are interpreted in future cases.

Donoso: In one of the most litigated environmental issues in Panama, the Supreme Court agreed with CIAM that the Government acted illegally when it lifted the protected status of the Donoso region in order to allow mining operations. The Court ordered the protected area be re-established.

Bay of Panama: CIAM led Panamanian civil society efforts to require that the Bay’s protected area status be restored. CIAM litigated successfully against a government regulation that allowed the destruction of more mangroves. This was a very important precedent regarding conservation policy. Once CIAM accomplished this outcome, the organization worked with the civil society and Panamanian legislature to create a new legal regime to protect the Bay of Panama. This was accomplished by the first public law of 2015.

CIAM has called on the Environmental Authority to repeal a resolution that threatens watersheds and allows large-scale projects such hydroelectric dams to use up to 90% of the water in rivers, lakes and other ecosystems. CIAM created a formal petition to the Authority, asking it to revoke a resolution that limits to 10% the environmental flow of all the rivers in Panama. The petition calls on the government to create a regulation for environmental flow that takes into account the environmental, human, and cultural values of rivers, as well as accounting for the specific characteristics of each ecosystem in terms of their ecology and their capacity to meet the needs of the people that depend on them. The NGOs also called for the public to be given the chance to participate in determining the environmental flow of rivers.

In terms of CIAM’s advocacy efforts, we have built new alliances. Among these are the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Waterkeepers Alliance to protect the Charges River, which provides drinking water to 1.6 million people; World Resources Institute (WRI); and Open Society Foundation. We support the “Principle 10”, a United Nations Biodiversity Convention established in 1992, wherein the right to access environmentally relevant information was established as a norm. Our advocacy initiatives include work with community based organizations, creating the Panamanglar Network, whose mission is the defense of mangroves and wetland across the country, promoting legislative and regulatory change, and carrying out environmental education activities.

Panama’s leading environmental law center has provided pro-bono legal representation to peasant and indigenous communities affected, or potentially affected, by Canadian mining companies, before government agencies, national courts and international human rights bodies.

1. **What are some projects you are looking towards for the future?**

We are working on developing a strategy for available fundraising, and transitioning our scope away from “pure” environmental issues to more human health related affairs; especially cancer and other diseases caused by polluted ecosystems and other sources of environmental threat such as climate change, and mismanagement of waste. CIAM is open to receive donations from responsible partners.