Romina was beginning her international career in public interest litigation, convinced that one day she would return to her native land to give back to her society the benefit of the education she had already received. She chose to continue her post-graduate education in the United States, where she received a scholarship to study a Masters degree in International Public Interest Law from the American University in Washington DC. Years later, American University would award Romina the prestigious Peter Ciccino Award for her distinguished contribution to the promotion of international public interest litigation.

Her Professional Career

Romina's thirst for learning, her curiosity for discovery, her profound conviction of the need to collaborate in the construction of a more just society, brought her to live and work with communities in countries as diverse as Peru, Nicaragua, Cuba, the Central American Atlantic Coast, Haiti, Cambodia, and Washington, DC. There she build the foundations of her professional career, working with local and indigenous communities suffering human rights violations. She helped train judges and prosecutors in places like Cambodia, working for civil society and international organizations alike.

In Nicaragua, she helped the afro-latino garífunas community and the Awas Tingni, leading the International Human Rights Law Group (now Global Rights) Latin America Program, aimed to help guarantee access to justice for minorities, victims of human rights violations. She took on the defense of human rights cases, many of which involved the illegal appropriation of natural resources. She engaged in initiatives to bring peace to the war-torn region, and contributed to negotiations of disarmament in former guerilla areas.

In 1995, she moved to Peru, as Assistant Director of the OAS’s Mission to the City of Chiclayo, where she would receive denunciations of electoral rights violations, and where she participated as an international observer to the conflict zone between Peru and Ecuador.

In 1996, the International Human Rights Law Group (IHRLG) offered her another post focused on human rights protection, in Cambodia. Despite her young age, Romina rapidly acquired responsibilities in the coordination and direction of a USAID funded democracy building program in Cambodia. Romina became Provincial Director for the Law Group’s offices in Prey Veng and Svay Rieng provinces, near the Vietnamese border, where she trained judges and prosecutors on legal procedure and case analysis. Her human rights training extended into Cambodia’s prison system, where she paid regular visits to local prisons, and trained prison guards and directors on basic human rights compliance.
She also worked on institutional strengthening of the judicial sector, aiding both Cambodian Provinces build up their public infrastructure.

Her time engaged with the Inter-American Human Rights System also took her to Peru and Haiti, where she worked with the Organization of American States as an electoral observer. After her Asia residency in 1996-97, Romina returned to Washington DC, and began leading the International Human Rights Law Group’s Latin America Program, representing victims of human rights across Latin America, including the defense of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay Cuba.

In 1998, Romina was named legal representative for 2,000 Cuban prisoners in Guantanamo, a case taken before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, against the United States, for human rights violations occurring at the prison. She was on the US Television Program, 60-Minutes, which reported on the case, including the mismanagement of US public funds which were supposed to be used for prison maintenance. Her engagement helped improve prison conditions substantially, while the prison treatment code was also reviewed for cases of extradition.

*The Awas Tingni Case and the Link between Human Rights and Environment*

While Romina was heading the Latin America Program at the Law Group, and finishing up her Masters Degree in International Public Interest Law at the American University, she authored an *Amicus Curiae Brief* (a legal reasoning paper offered to a court to help judges think through the legal aspects of a case) for what would become a leading case at the international level, now known as the *Awas Tingni case* in Nicaragua. This experience would change her life. The Awas Tingni are an indigenous community of Nicaragua who at the time were having serious problems with a Korean lumbering company who was illegally extracting timber from their autonomous and protected territory. The lumber company had explicit authorization from the government of Nicaragua to extract the natural resource, despite the fact that the law protected these lands for the Awas Tingni and that the community should have consultative and authoritative rights over any commercial activity in the area.

The community had denounced and filed complaints in Nicaraguan Courts, fully exhausting all local judicial remedies and as a last resort, they approached the Inter-American Human Rights System, seeking justice. But at that time, the world, and specifically, the *legal* world, did not quite understand that the degradation of the environment was cause of human rights violations to people and communities. In a momentous and precedent setting effort, Romina drafted an *Amicus Curiae brief* offering a new legal reasoning that would change the way the Court understood the inseparable links between environmental protection and the full guarantee of human rights. The Awas Tingni won a resounding victory at the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, and then subsequently at the Inter-American Court on Human Rights.
Following on this experience, and realizing the importance of this verdict, and the potential that linking environmental degradation to human rights violations could have for global sustainability, Romina decided that this link should and would forever mark a path for her quest to advance the protection of the public interest.

Romina's Return to Argentina and the Founding of CEDHA

In 1999, already having lived and worked on three different continents in a multiplicity of roles, all in some way linked to human rights advocacy and the protection of human rights, she chose to return to her native homeland, Argentina, and with the firm conviction to bring attention to the human rights violations caused by environmental degradation, she turned her advocacy work to defend human rights violations and promote environmental protection in Argentina. In 1999 she returns to Cordoba and founds The Center for Human Rights and Environment (CEDHA) from which she begins an effort to introduce the notion of the need for a more robust national environmental public policy that would promote sustainable development while defending the human rights of people and communities.

From CEDHA, Romina leads a team of young professionals, young lawyers and numerous volunteers, and offers free legal assistance to victims of environmental degradation. Convinced that both the State and the Private Sector must respect and protect human rights, CEDHA’s advocacy work turns to both sectors, seeking policy evolution and greater environmental and human rights protection from public agencies and corporate actors. CEDHA was one of the first organizations in Argentina to begin to address corporate social responsibility (CSR), but unlike most, Romina and CEDHA’s insistence was CSR from a legally binding perspective, and not from a solely volunteer angle as most institutions and actors began to discuss corporate social responsibility. This was a discussion that was at the time embryonic and it would not be for many years later, that CEDHA’s advocacy work and approach to CSR obligations for corporations would materialize into an international move to push private companies into the realm of legally binding human rights obligations, an issue and area still very much central to CEDHA’s advocacy work today.

From CEDHA, Romina began her human rights advocacy work, at a local, national and regional level, pushing to introduce more effective environmental public policy. Building on her experience in Cambodia, she approached Argentina’s legal system, engaging with judges and prosecutors. Soon afterwards, she convinced the Attorney General’s office to introduce the figure of “environmental prosecutor” to investigate environmental crimes, a revolution for the Argentine federal judicial system. CEDHA would receive legal complaints for contamination, and freely defend victims of these abuses. Romina and CEDHA trained judges and prosecutors, media representatives, civil society organizations and community leaders, who until then, had practically ignored environmental contamination. Society began to change on environmental matters, and CEDHA was leading much of the discussion at the local and national level.

In 2001, Romina created the very first Human Rights and Environment Legal Clinic in Latin America with the sole objective of providing free legal services to victims of human rights violations stemming from environmental degradation. Building on her experience in Central America of “community clinics”, she begins to train law students and young legal professionals, instilling in them the dedication to defend the public interest, and vulnerable communities, as an moral obligation to lawyers, something completely absent in the national legal training received by Argentine law students.

In 2003, she publishes “The Human Cost of Defending the Planet: Human Rights Violations of Environmental Defenders in the Americas”. Through this publication, CEDHA brings visibility to the systematic abuses suffered by environmental activists across the Latin American region.

In 2004, Romina is named legal representative of the victims of the Oroya Case against Peru, now before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. She works to oblige the Peruvian government to adopt special measures to protect women and children that are contaminated by the US Company Doe Run, in one of the most contaminated sites on the planet. That same year, Romina opens an office in the Patagonia (CEDHA Patagonia), and begins providing legal assistance to garbage scavengers in the city of Bariloche. CEDHA Patagonia helps empower informal garbage workers, who despite recycling some 60% of the city’s garbage, suffered discrimination and had no formal worker rights or even basic sanitary and health measures in their daily work. Children accompanied mothers during sub zero temperature days in the scavenging, and regularly ate from the garbage collected. CEDHA helped create a worker cooperative bringing formalization of workers into the labor force. The protection of children, the signing of worker contracts, and the introduction of sanitary measures were some of the improvements achieved. That same year, CEDHA begins to represent victims of an informal settlement in Cordoba called Chacras de la Merced, a community on the fringes of urban Cordoba, with now running water or sewers, and under direct contamination of the city’s overflowed sewage treatment facility. Romina and CEDHA’s legal team win an important precedent-setting case in local courts, obliging the city and province to invest in bringing freshwater and expanding sewage treatment facilities.

In 2005, building on her US exposure to the southern Environmental Justice movement, Romina creates an innovative program focused on building links to address Poverty and Environment, addressing the systemic “environmental discrimination” inherent to tendencies of urban sprawl and the failure of State agencies to address systemic discrimination resulting in environmental degradation in the most vulnerable social sectors. That same year, she published “Human Rights and Environment in Argentina: A Proposal for a National Agenda” (Advocatus), which enunciated an agenda that she would one year later, take to the highest level of Argentina’s environmental public policy. See: http://biblio13.mdp.edu.ar/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=2053

That year, fully immersed in her environmental advocacy, and building the bridges between the human rights and environmental worlds, in 2005, the City of Cordoba’s Stock Exchange, bestowed on her, the Youth Leadership Award, for her notable contribution to the public interest, followed the next year by the Good Neighbor Award for her exemplary contribution to society given to Romina by the City of Cordoba.
The Sophie Prize 2006

In the year 2006, at a global level and for her pioneering work to bring human rights and environment together, both at a conceptual and at a tangible level, for her visionary leadership, for her unwavering commitment dedicated to the Earth and to victims of environmental degradation, she received the The Sophie Prize, given in Norway to one person yearly, for their outstanding contribution to sustainable development. The 2006 Sophie Prize pointed to Romina’s exceptional and innovative achievements in bringing together the defense of human rights alongside environmental protection. She was the first Latin American to receive this honor. The Sophie Prize instantly catapulted Romina to an unprecedented international arena, and highlighted her work on protecting the rights of indigenous communities.
One of the most emblematic cases that would forever mark Romina’s path was her advocacy alongside the Citizens’ Assembly of Gualeguaychu (pronounced: WALEWAYCHOO) of the riverside city of the same name, and the residents of a small quaint town in Uruguay called Fray Bentos (whose only fame came from being home to the production of canned meat called SPAM). Both communities rejected the Uruguayan Government’s decision to build mega pulp mills on the Uruguay River, the natural border between Argentina and Uruguay, a contaminating industry that would change the landscape, kill the rich ecosystems of the region and permanently change the local identity and culture of a community very sensitive to its environmental resources. Both Argentina and Uruguay’s Foreign Ministries had refused to engage in the conflict, letting private interests, buttressed by international financing from the World Bank’s IFC to move forward with industry investments. Romina helped the local communities launch one of the world’s most notorious environmental campaigns ever, confronting political leaders, financial institutions, international organizations and numerous foreign ministries in the industrialized world.

As representative of the Gualeguaychú Assembly, Romina’s fight to stop the Finnish company Botnia, and the Spanish ENCE, included filing complaints at numerous international organizations. She brought legal complaints against the Directors of the companies and innovatively, against the World Bank’s Executive Directors who had voted to give the companies the necessary financing to guarantee investments. She also spearheaded an effort to engage the financial corporate sector through innovative approaches to guarantee the application of the voluntary Equator Principles to ensure sustainable investments. Through her efforts, and a complaint presented to the
Dutch bank ING, the Dutch financial giant decided to withdraw US$480 million that had been pledged to the investment. Her advocacy against the mills extended to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, where CEDHA filed a complaint, for the first time focusing on an international development bank project and against the Government of Uruguay for violating the rights of cross-river-border communities, and she presented a due diligence complaint to the World Bank’s CAO Ombudsman, which later agreed with CEDHA that the World Bank had failed to comply with its financing due diligence. She also later denounced the Argentine Government’s unjust persecution of environmental activists, wrongly accused of murder due to a roadside accident near their roadblock of the international bridge between Argentina and Uruguay at the site of the mill. Romina herself would be the subject of such injustice and persecution be the judiciary.

This struggle in the defense of Gualeguaychú and Fray Bentos, to stop the pulp mills, marked a “before and after” moment in her career.
Romina's as Argentina’s Highest Environmental Authority before the National Environmental Secretariat

Just weeks after receiving the prestigious Sophie Prize 2006, then President Nestor Kirchner called Romina to his office and offered her the leadership of Argentina Environmental Agency, equivalent to the US’s EPA. It was an agency abandoned in the trenches of inefficient public policy, residing as a sub-agency of the Ministry of Health. Romina had returned to Argentina in 1999 to contribute to building environmental public policy. Just six years later, she was now Argentina’s highest environmental authority and would place in motion a process where for the first time, Argentina would have more effective, more targeted, more monitored and controlled, and more efficient environmental policy. Her condition to the President was that The Environment Secretariat be given the highest political priority, that it be moved to the Ministerial Level, that its budget be increased and its power extended, and that the President support the Secretariat with the necessary political backing in the toughest of moments that were surely to come during the monitoring and control of contaminating industry. The President granted all of Romina’s requests and she began her tenure as Argentina’s Environment Minister.

For the first time ever, Argentina had dynamic environmental policy in motion, and protecting people and communities from environmental degradation was a central element to the policy. Her first priority was ensuring environmental compliance and so she set out to build an investigative environmental police force, that could conduct audits, levy fines and if needed, conduct closures of contaminating industries.

When Romina assumed the leadership of the Environment Secretariat, its institutional weakness was absolute. The office of environmental compliance of the Secretariat was a single small room, with 10 staff and three outdated computers. Nearly 2,000 compliance cases were stalled and about to expire their statutory limit for action. The contaminators would suffer no consequences. The compliance unit of the ministry did not even have a vehicle to conduct inspections/audits, it would do the few site visits it actually did carry out by hiring a taxi. With Romina’s arrival, and with a firm Presidential mandate supporting the Secretary, things began to change.

With the conviction that one of the central responsibilities of public policy is to ensure legal compliance, in her first year as Environment Secretary, she created the Environmental Investigation and Compliance for Environmental Crimes. She hired a new time, trained staff, acquired infrastructure and machinery, built laboratories, and strengthened the capacity of the Environment Secretariat’s team to conduct inspections and audits. From July of 2006 (when she assumed office) to June of 2008 (considering that it took her several months to get up and running), Argentina’s Environment Secretariat conducted 4,776 technical inspections of environmental degradation, resolving the backlog of cases, without a single case of the previously initiated cases expiring due to inaction. She fined 444 companies, enacted 110 preventive measures by the State, and levied fines and closed renown companies the likes of Shell, Danone, Firestone and Petrobras, setting an example of the new environmental compliance era on which Argentina was now embarked.

She also embarked on the clean up of one of the world’s most contaminated rivers, the Riachuelo-Matanza River Basin, home to over 7,000,000 people and over 10,000 contaminating industries, with little or now waste treatment and an overflowing sewage treatment system. She devised the Matanza-Riachuelo Clean Up Program intervening in 14 municipal jurisdictions to study, collect data, and carry out clean up programs. As part of this
initiative, the Environment Secretariat carried out 120 closures, 9,000 inspections and placed in motion the over all strategic plan, which included carrying out significant public works in sewage and drainage, in addition to river side clean up programs.

Romina also identified the Sali Dulce River Basin as a key intervention area, a bain involving multiple provinces and numerous contaminating industries in one of Argentina’s most sensitive ecological environments.

For the first time, Argentina’s environmental authority strengthened its Dangerous Waste Unit and activity, carrying out 831 inspections across the country and initiating nearly 100 investigative instances.

In this way, Romina and her team at the Environment Ministry, began intervening in contaminating sectors that rarely, if ever, received an environmental inspector from the federal government. Aware of the many industrial sectors which were abandoned to local influence peddling, with little or no environmental monitoring, she then turned to the extractive sector, which was until then, bound only by provincial regulations. The federal government simply never intervened in the sector for environmental reasons. Romina would change this. The Environmental Secretariat began to systematically request entry into mining sites, to the unease and fierce resistance of mining companies that did not want federal oversight in their operations.

She also turned to pulp and paper, and in response to the growing case against the two Uruguayan Pulp mills on the Uruguay River, Romina began to oblige Argentina’s pulp mills to modernize their production and reduce contamination.

Realizing that environmental policy needed to be streamlined through government and society, Romina also engaged other ministries and agencies within the State to buttress environmental protection, from the Attorney General’s Office (to build environmental guarantees into judicial protection) to the Public Works Ministry (to focus on water provision and quality) to the Defense Ministry (to protect water, oceans, and large green expanses), to Education (to build environmental education) to Health (to ensure human health in contaminated zones), and many others.

She also worked closely with Argentina’s congressional authorities and focused on the introduction of key parts of the environmental code, including a new forestry law, an environmental insurance mandate regulation to oblige companies to obtain environmental insurance. She also embodied the Matanza-Riachuelo river clean up program in an innovative legal framework and authority which is now studies at a global level as an example of how to harmonize and coordinate a multi-jurisdictional river system.

In many of these newly intervened spaces, mining companies, leather tanneries, dairy producers, pulp mills petrochemical companies, oil and gas companies, refineries, it was the first time that the national environmental authority entered into the scene to monitor and ensure environmental compliance of
industry. It was at this time that she and her staff/team began to receive regular threats, threats to her children and to her family. However, this did not thwart the activism that was coming from Argentina’s Environmental Authority, but only further fueled her drive to ensuring environmental compliance by Argentine industries.

It was at the height of her State led environmental activism that Romina also suffered regular unfounded accusations in the media and by political opposition party representatives, aiming to discredit in any way possible, ethically, morally, or professionally.

As the stakes grew, and as more and more industries were intervened, more fines levied and more closures ordered, and as the political machinery of the incumbent administration also suffered the expected wear and tear of most governments, her political capital and relative leverage to continue her until now unabated drive to reign in contaminating industries, began to loose ground.

Romina had received a community from a mining province, concerned that large multinational mining companies were destroying glaciers in the high Andes Mountains, to get to gold reserves.

When Romina discovered that these claims were true, and that companies like Barrick Gold, the Canadian gold miner and largest gold mining company in the world were actually proposing in their official project documents to “dynamite” glaciers in order to extract gold, she began an effort to get a glacier protection law passed. Oddly, no country in the world had a law to protect glaciers, and Argentina, if Romina would have it her way, would be the first, and it would expressly prohibit mining in glacier areas.
Romina reached into her Congressional contacts, and help get passed Argentina’s Glacier Protection Law in 2008, unanimously voted by Congress to protect glaciers and prohibit mining in glacier and periglacial environments (permafrost areas). However, a few phone calls from the mining sector to the President secured a Presidential Veto. This unfortunate decision from the President, bowing to corporate interests against the greater interests of society to protect the birth of some of Argentina’s most crucial water ways, marked the end of the line of Romina’s tenure as national Environment Secretary, and unfortunately, also marked the end of a short lived period in Argentina where environmental law was promoted and enforced.

Obliged by the President to support the Glacier Law Veto, or leave, Romina chose to step down as Environment Minister and return to her previous civil society role as environmental advocate.

In 2010, The Glacier Law came back, victorious and survived the President’s veto, becoming the world’s first glacier protection law. Romina and CEDHA turned to glacier protection as one of its most energetic programs to date, producing numerous reports on mining impacts to glaciers and providing key documentation for communities to fight against mining activity impacting glaciers and permafrost areas.
A Vocation for Reverting Climate Change and Curing our Planet’s Atmosphere

As Environment Secretary for Argentina, Romina has a very large influence in the ongoing climate negotiations to reduce CO2 emissions. Argentina became a leading global voice under Romina’s leadership. In the runup to the Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2008, Denmark, France, China, Mexico, Brazil, the United States, Switzerland and South Africa, which integrated the Greenland Dialogues, entrusted Romina as their President to prepare for the Climate Summit in Copenhagen. In the parallel Montreal Protocol, governing gases that affect the Ozone, Romina saw a fantastic opportunity to help slow climate change, since many of these gases where also greenhouse gases contributing to climate change. She convinced colleague Marina da Silva of Brazil to table a proposition to accelerated the phase-out of green house gases and reduce climate change trends by about ten years, with three to five times the CO2 elimination potential. Romina led a small team to nearly single handedly convinced the 180 members of the Montreal Protocol to agree to the phase out. That year, the Montreal Protocol gave Romina and her team (as well as Argentina) the Montreal Protocol Award, and the US’s EPA awarded her with the Climate Protection Award for 2008. She was also awarded Mexico’s Legal Network’s Highest Environmental Award that year, also for her advocacy to stop climate change. Romina has since embarked on created and implementing global public policy efforts to revert climate change, including the creation and assistance in leadership of the UN’s new agency, the Climate and Clean Air Coalition.

Romina’s Return to Environmental Activism at CEDHA

Today Romina is actively engaged with her team of collaborators in her quest for seeking environmental justice, attempting to bring environmental impacts to view, denouncing and controlling contaminating industries and ensuring that the State duly takes up its responsibilities for environmental protection. CEDHA continues its work to denounce environmental impacts of mining, defend Andean glaciers, protect the atmosphere, and defend victims of environmental degradation. Since Romina left her role as Argentina’s federal environmental authority, CEDHA has published numerous reports that shows mining impacts or potential to glaciers in provinces such as San Juan, La Rioja, Catamarca and Mendoza. CEDHA has also expanded advocacy to address the arrival of fracking operations to Argentina in the ecologically sensitive Patagonia region.
Romina Picolotti has demonstrated throughout her long and illustrious career, through her personal and professional achievements, through her efforts and initiatives, and through her relentless effort to protect the environment and the human rights of people and communities affected by environmental degradation, from civil society and as a government representative in charge of national environmental policy, her tireless devotion to create a more sustainable world. Today, more than ever, for her personal and spiritual conviction, as President of CEDHA, as an environmentalist and citizen of the world, she continues true to her calling and to her dream.