

Economic Commission for Europe

Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

Task Force on Access to Information

Sixth meeting

Geneva, 3-4 October 2019

Item 6 of the provisional agenda

Closing

Key outcomes¹

as agreed by the Task Force on Access to Information at its sixth meeting²

I. Opening and adoption of the agenda

1. The Task Force adopted the agenda as set out in the document AC/TF.AI-6/Inf.1.

II. Thematic focus: Active dissemination of environmental information

(i) *Effective provision of information in case of an imminent threat to human health and the environment*

2. The Task Force:

(a) Highlighted that the effective implementation of article 5, paragraph 1 (c), of the Aarhus Convention supports the achievement of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals and can contribute to the work under auspices of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 and other international commitments as addressed by the representatives of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, World Health Organization, World Meteorological Organization, UNECE Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe;

(b) Welcomed the exchange of experience, good practices, challenges and lessons learned as presented by the delegations regarding the provision of information to the public in accordance with article 5, paragraph 1 (c), of the Convention;

(c) Highlighted the importance of transparency and effective risk assessment in the event of any imminent threat to human health and the environment and provision of the information held by a public authority immediately and without delays to the members of the public who may be affected to enable them to take measures to prevent or mitigate harm;

¹ The document was not formally edited.

² The list of speakers, other documents, presentations and statements are available from: <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=50574> .

(d) Called on Parties to ensure an adequate flow of information to public authorities from operators whose activities may significantly affect the environment in case of related imminent threat to human health and the environment and to encourage such operators to cooperate with the public authorities as appropriate to ensure that all information is disseminated immediately and without delay to members of the public who may be affected;

(e) Encouraged the use of the established emergency telephone numbers, radio emergency networks, media, including traditional media and social media, online portals and mobile applications used for the routine dissemination of environmental information to provide information to the public in case of emergencies as appropriate in accordance with the needs of different users;

(f) Noted the importance of addressing the use of electronic information tools to support the implementation of article 5, paragraph 1 (c), of the Convention in the updated Recommendations on electronic information tools;

(g) Encouraged Parties and stakeholders to continue the exchange of information on the implementation of article 5, paragraph 1 (c), of the Convention through national implementation reports, case studies on electronic information tools and resources for the Aarhus Clearinghouse and highlighted the importance to continue the discussion in the next intersessional period.

(ii) *The use of modern technologies by the public*

3. The Task Force:

(a) Welcomed the exchange of experience, good practices, challenges and lessons learned as presented by the speakers regarding the use of modern digital technologies by the public;

(b) Noted the importance of addressing the use of modern digital technologies and the provision of environmental information by the public (e.g. citizen science, lay, local and traditional knowledge, other citizen engagement initiatives) in the updated Recommendations on electronic information tools;

(c) Encouraged Parties and stakeholders to continue the exchange of information on recent developments in the use of modern digital technologies by the public through case studies on electronic information tools and resources for the Aarhus Clearinghouse and highlighted the importance to continue considering this subject in the next intersessional period.

(iii) *Update of the Recommendations on electronic information tools*

4. The Task Force:

(a) Took note of the indicative timeline set out in information document 2 on the update of the Recommendations on electronic information tools (AC/TF.AI-6/Inf.2) and the outcomes of the consultations as set out in information document 3 (AC/TF.AI-6/Inf.3) and its Addendum (AC/TF.AI-6/Inf.3/Add.1);

- (b) Expressed its appreciation to Parties, partner organizations and stakeholders for submitting case studies on electronic information tools and drafting proposals as reported in information document 3 (AC/TF.AI-6/Inf.3);
- (c) Suggested addressing the outcomes of the UNECE – EEA workshop on Open Data for the Environment (Geneva, 2 October 2019), other relevant activities related to the Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European region and the European Union Environmental Information Systems project in the updated Recommendations on electronic information tools;
- (d) Suggested addressing recent developments regarding the reporting on the state of the environment, electronic public records, the use of Copernicus and other Earth Observation systems, big data, health-related information, in the updated Recommendations on electronic information tools;
- (e) Took note of the comments received at the present meeting and requested participants to submit to the secretariat their comments and drafting proposals presented at the meeting by 1 November 2019;
- (f) Encouraged Parties and stakeholders to continue their active engagement in the consultation process on the update of the Recommendations in accordance with the indicative timeline set out in information document 2 (AC/TF.AI-6/Inf.2);
- (g) Invited national focal points to the Aarhus Convention to liaise with national focal points to the Protocol on PRTRs in order to provide consolidated comments on the draft Recommendations relevant for the PRTR matter and to involve non-governmental organizations, Aarhus Centres, academia and other stakeholders in countries in consultations on the Recommendations;
- (h) Called on Parties, partner organizations and stakeholders to continue building capacities and providing sufficient resource mobilisation to modernising environmental information systems and promoting their interoperability and accessibility in forms and formats meeting the needs of different users;
- (i) Encouraged Parties, partner organizations and stakeholders to continue the exchange of information on recent developments in dissemination of environmental information and the use of electronic information tools through national implementation reports, case studies on electronic information tools, the Aarhus Clearinghouse and its national nodes.

III. Stocktaking of recent and upcoming developments

(i) *Recent developments on access to environmental information and the application of restrictions*

5. The Task Force:

- (a) Welcomed the exchange of experience, good practices, challenges and recent policy and legislative developments as presented by the delegations regarding the scope of environmental information, its public access and the application of exceptions;
- (b) Welcomed recent developments regarding publishing environmental information as open digital data records as reported by the speakers;
- (c) Encouraged the Parties to keep under continuous review the application of the exceptions in disclosure of environmental information, especially on emissions.

(ii) Protection of whistle-blowers and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the Convention

6. The Task Force:

- (a) Recognised that effective legislative, practical and other measures for whistle-blowers, workers and other persons to report violations supports the environmental law enforcement;
- (b) Welcomed the exchange of experience, good practices, challenges and recent policy and legislative developments as presented by the delegations regarding the protection of whistle-blowers and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the Convention;
- (c) Noted that effective implementation of article 3, paragraph 8, of the Aarhus Convention is closely linked with the implementation of article 3, paragraph 3, of the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Register and that they are crucial for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 and its target 16.10;
- (d) Reiterated that the above mentioned provisions are also closely linked with the implementation of the respective principles on human rights and the protection of workers from exposure to toxic substances reported by the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes (A/HRC/42/41) and relevant instruments of the International Labour Organization;
- (e) Welcomed the relevant initiatives of the Parties as reported by the speakers and called to continue taking the necessary legislative, regulatory, practical and other measures supporting safe operation of whistle-blowers, workers and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the Convention and ensuring safe reporting of cases of penalizations, persecution or harassment for their involvement;
- (f) Encouraged Parties and stakeholders to continue the exchange of information on the protection of whistle-blowers and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the Convention through national implementation reports and the Aarhus Clearinghouse.

IV. Activities under other international forums.

7. The Task Force:

- (a) Welcomed the exchange of information on recent activities to measure and monitor progress towards environment-related Sustainable Development Goals as presented by the speakers;
- (b) Invited Parties to take additional measures to address the challenges in collecting and sharing the data for environment-related SDG indicators and to consider the use of data resulted from the Earth Observation and Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers for this purpose as relevant.

VI. Closing

7. The Task Force:

- (a) Agreed on the outcomes of the meeting as presented by the Chair and discussed under each item;
 - (b) Requested the secretariat, in consultation with the Chair, to finalize the meeting report and incorporate these outcomes.
-