

20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AARHUS CONVENTION

Ms. Martine Rohn-Brossard

Deputy Head of International Affairs Division / Head of Europe, Trade and Development
Section, Federal Office for the Environment, Switzerland

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and friends,

Let me begin with the following quote of Kofi Annan by the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention in 2001: “The Aarhus Convention is the most ambitious venture in environmental democracy undertaken under the auspices of the UN. Its adoption was a remarkable step forward in the development of international law”. 20 years later, the Aarhus Convention is still a very strong instrument, well implemented also thanks to its compliance mechanism, which is recognized far beyond the UNECE. We can be proud to be here today to celebrate this 20th anniversary.

I invite you to remember the year when you join your ministry or organization. What happened that year regarding environmental democracy? I remember in 1986 when I arrived in the Ministry of Environment in Switzerland, it was the year of Schweizerhalle, a big fire in a chemical industry in Basel, which severely polluted the Rhine River. Now the Rhine River recovered thanks to strong political will, policies and engagement of all stakeholders. Public participation and access to environmental information are part of the solution. I am sure that all of you have similar stories regarding environmental democracy.

Looking back, the last two decades have been an eventful period for the Convention:

- a journey full of success, challenges and commitments.
- 47 UNECE Parties have joined the Convention. Each new acceding Party, contributed to the promotion of the Convention’s Principles and the protection of environmental democracy in the pan-European region and beyond.
- Today, the idea of the Aarhus Convention that greater public awareness of and involvement in environmental matters is crucial to improve environmental protection has spread all around the world.
- The three pillars of the Convention - access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters – are relevant to a wide range of global concerns, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, governance of the extractive industry, natural resources management, health or eradication of poverty.
- As citizens, the confidence with which we demand our right to have access to environmental information, to have our voice heard in environmental decision making, to access to justice if our rights are violated, shows the impact the Convention has made in our lives and will have on future generations to live in a healthy environment.

There is, however, no journey without its share of obstacles along the road and we should not take the success for granted: the negotiation of a multilateral agreement is not an easy task; the ratification process is a big burden; the concrete implementation is a challenge. During these last twenty years, all together we have had to overcome many challenges and the Convention has grown stronger because of it.

Even at the last session of the Meeting of the Parties in Budva, we recognized together that it is important to stay vigilant and continue to protect and promote the Convention's principles also thanks to the excellent support of the Compliance Committee.

In the future, the Aarhus Convention principles, together with the other instruments and processes of the UNECE will continue to play an important role also in the implementation of the SDGs or in the context of big infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

To conclude, dear colleagues, allow me to emphasize that twenty years is a generation. May the new generation continue to build on such a strong heritage and witness the benefits of the Aarhus Convention that we have together so patiently cared to implement.
Thank you to all of you for your commitment!