**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

**Twenty-fifth meeting**

Geneva, XXXXXX 2021

Item xxx of the provisional agenda
**Public participation in decision-making**

 Draft Decision VII/…
Promoting effective public participation in decision-making[[1]](#footnote-2)

 Prepared by the Bureau

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| *Summary* |
|  The present document sets out a draft decision on promoting effective public participation in decision-making. The Working Group of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters at its twenty-fourth meeting (1-3 July 2020 and 29-30 October 2020) requested the Bureau to prepare a draft decision on public participation in decision-making for the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties (scheduled for October 2021). The present document was prepared by the Bureau on the basis of the relevant outcomes of the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties; the Note by the Chair of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making (AC/WGP-24/Inf.2); the outcomes of the thematic session held under the Working Group of the Parties, work undertaken by the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making in the current intersession period[[2]](#footnote-3); and decision VI/2 on the same subject matter, adopted by the Meeting of the Parties at its sixth session (Budva, Montenegro, 11–14 September 2017). There will be opportunities for open-ended consultations among national focal points and stakeholders on the present draft document after the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group. The Bureau is expected to revise the draft document thereafter in the light of the comments received and to submit it to the Working Group for consideration and approval at its twenty-fifth meeting, with a view to its subsequent submission to the Meeting of the Parties for consideration at its seventh session. |

*The Meeting of the Parties,*

 *Recalling* the provisions of articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), and the provisions of article 6 bis of the amendment to the Convention on public participation in decisions on the deliberate release into the environment and placing on the market of genetically modified organisms,

 *Also recalling* its decisions EMP.II/1, V/2 and VI/2 on public participation in decision-making, VII/… on the strategic plan for 2022–2030 and VII/… on the work programme for 2022–2025,

 *Recognizing* the critical role of effective public participation for successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 16 and its targets 16.6, 16.7 and 16.10,

*Mindful* that the national implementation reports, the findings of the Compliance Committee, relevant case law of the Parties and the work carried out under the auspices of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making to date have, collectively, shown that challenges remain to the full implementation of the second pillar of the Convention across the region,

 *Recognizing* the vital role played by the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making in bringing together experts from governments, civil society and other stakeholders to exchange experiences regarding those challenges and to explore possible good practices to address them,

 *Welcoming* the important contribution to furthering implementation of the second pillar played by organizations engaged in capacity-building at the national and subregional levels,

 *Also* *welcoming* the work of Aarhus Centres in several countries, as platforms to facilitate public participation by providing environmental information, raising public awareness, promoting participatory debate on environmental policies, programmes and projects and providing assistance to members of the public in exercising their rights,

 *Underlining* the need to further the implementation of the second pillar of the Convention (articles 6, 7, 8 and, prospectively, 6 bis) so as to provide for more effective public participation in decision-making in environmental matters,

 *Having reviewed* the reports of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making and the outcomes of the thematic session of the Working Group of the Parties in the period since the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties,[[3]](#footnote-4)

 1. *Notes* with appreciation the work undertaken by the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making and expresses its gratitude to Italy for its leadership of the Task Force;

 2. *Recognizes* the valuable role in a number of Parties of the Maastricht Recommendations on Promoting Effective Public Participation in Decision-making in Environmental Matters (Maastricht Recommendations),[[4]](#footnote-5) developed under the auspices of the Task Force, and invites Parties, signatories, other interested States and stakeholders to use them as a guidance to improve implementation of the second pillar of the Convention, including by translating them into national and, as appropriate, local languages, and distributing them among all relevant target groups dealing with public participation at the national and subnational levels, such as public authorities, non-governmental organizations, operators, the private sector and the general public The Task Force should further continue monitoring the use of the Maastricht Recommendations;

3. *Welcomes* initiatives taken by Parties, signatories, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, research institutes and other stakeholders to study good practices, examine practical means of promoting more effective public participation in environmental decision-making and share their findings and experience, and encourages further activities to this end;

4. *Welcomes* initiatives of Parties, signatories, international organizations and other stakeholders to promote safe participation in decision-making and strengthen the protection of environmental defenders and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the provisions of the Convention against penalization, persecution, harassment and other forms of retaliation for their involvement, and calls on Parties, signatories, international organizations and other stakeholders to further support such initiatives;

 5. *Encourages* Parties, signatories, other interested States, partner organizations and stakeholders to continue providing case studies through the Aarhus Clearinghouse and its Good Practice database;

6. *Invites* Parties, signatories, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders to strengthen implementation of the public participation pillar of the Convention at the national level, and where possible to make resources available for this purpose;

 7. *Invites* Parties, signatories, other interested States, partner organizations and stakeholders engaged in capacity-building to further the implementation of the second pillar of the Convention and to focus on developing training programmes at the national level, as a priority, and also at the subregional level, for public officials involved in the day-to-day task of carrying out public participation procedures covered by articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Convention. Further, specific trainings and awareness raising events about the obligations under article 3 (8) among officials of public authorities, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, members of judiciary, international financial institutions, providers of private security services and developers should be strongly encouraged;

8. *Invites* researchers focusing on participatory processes and environmental decision-making to use the resources gathered under the auspices of the Task Force in their research, and also to share the results of their research with the Task Force;

 9. *Encourages* Parties, signatories, other interested States, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, research institutes and other stakeholders to participate in the activities under the Convention on public participation in decision-making and to allocate sufficient resources for this matter;

 10. *Decides* to extend in time the mandate of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making, under the authority of the Working Group of the Parties to the Convention;

 11. *Welcomes* the offer of [Party] to lead the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making;

12. *Requests* the Task Force, subject to the availability of resources and taking into account, inter alia, the national implementation reports, the findings of the Compliance Committee of a systemic nature, other relevant assessments and the experiences of the public, to continue working to strengthen the implementation of the public participation provisions of the Convention, with special attention to:

(a) Gathering information on experiences from Parties and stakeholders regarding the application of the Maastricht Recommendations;

(b) Overseeing the collection and dissemination of good practices in public participation in decision-making through the Aarhus Clearinghouse and its Good Practice online database;

(c) Exchanging good practices on how challenges in the implementation of public participation in decision- making, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, for example with regard to the public availability of documents and access to virtual hearings, have been successfully solved by Parties and stakeholders or are planned to be put in place in the future;

(d) Identifying the main obstacles to effective public participation in all types of decision-making within the scope of the Convention at the national, subnational and local levels, in particular with regard to issues of a systemic nature such as:

 (i) Meaningful and early public participation;

 (ii) The availability of all relevant documents to the public;

 (iii) Effective notification and time frames for public participation;

 (iv) Participation of vulnerable and marginalized groups;

 (v) Promoting safe public participation without persecution and harassment and protection of environmental defenders and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the provisions of the Convention;

 (vi) Ensuring that greater account is taken of the comments from the public in the final decisions, and ensuring the appropriate provision of feedback on how the public’s comments have been taken into account in the decisions;

(e) Addressing, in collaboration with relevant partner organizations and as appropriate, public participation in decision-making in a transboundary context and with regard to the following subjects:

(i) agriculture (Goal 2);

(ii) large infrastructure/transport (Goal 9);

(iii) urban development/cities (Goal 11);

(iv) health-related issues, linked to air pollution (Goal 3);

(v) fishery/oceans, seas, marine resources (Goal 14);

(vi) climate change (Goal 13);

(f) As resources allow, to prepare training materials to support the work detailed in subparagraphs (c), (d), and (e) above;

 13. *Requests* the Working Group of the Parties to hold a thematic session on promoting effective public participation in decision-making during one of its meetings in the coming intersessional period, with a view to providing opportunities for Parties, signatories and stakeholders to exchange experiences on the subject matters that deserve particular attention.

1. This document was not formally edited. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The Chair’s Note and comments delivered at and after the meeting are available from: https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/twenty-fourth-meeting-working-group-parties-aarhus-convention-site [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2019/23, ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2019/3 and ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2021/XXXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. ECE/MP.PP/2014/2/Add.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)