



The EcoForum as the national network of environmental non-governmental organizations of the Republic of Kazakhstan (EcoForum_Kazakhstan) expresses the gratitude to UNECE Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention and its Compliance Committee for an opportunity to comment the issues of public participation in decision making on environmental matters that are of high importance.

It is worth mentioning that the EcoForum_Kazakhstan Working Group on Public Participation almost from the first days of implementing the public hearings online introduced its regular monitoring in two industrialized regions of Kazakhstan, namely, in Pavlodar and Atyrau regions, where the environmental issues raise great public concern.

EcoForum_Kazakhstan fully admits that in a difficult situation of epidemiological risks, the development and implementation of projects should not be delayed. With this in mind, the EcoForum_Kazakhstan has sent a letter to the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of Kazakhstan as of May 5, 2020, stating its support to implement public hearings discussions/conferences in virtual mode.

During the monitoring, we have noticed that the online format of public hearings enables the participation of those people, who previously experienced problems with their participation. For example, persons with disabilities, mothers with young children, etc. Furthermore, this tool also allows the participation of representatives from other regions and cities by expanding the access to environmental NGOs to attend the hearings online. That said, we urge to continue utilize the online format of public hearings even after lifting the emergency and quarantine measures, associated with the COVID-19.

The online public hearings in the form of a video conference will help secure health safety of people given the remaining spread of infection even after the emergency quarantine. The gathering in large groups will continue pose great threat to people for a long time. Besides, the virtual hearings should be seen complementary to contemporary meetings and discussions, ensuring the access from remote regions.

At the same time, the EcoForum having held online hearings spotted a number of challenges that may impede the effective public participation. First of all, this is about the Internet connection, which relates to both the Internet quality and the lack of technical skills in application of activities in online mode. Problems also arise from the side of public hearing organizers regarding the procedures, which are still unregulated yet in virtual space.

A number of our colleagues also expressed concerns about the identification of participants during online hearings, which makes it difficult to determine the group(s) of relevant and interested stakeholders. There may be also other technical manipulations that can limit public participation, namely, restricting the public access, turning off the mics and other alike tricks.

Nevertheless, appreciating the opportunity to expand the remote public participation, the EcoForum_Kazakhstan proposes to utilize this form further and, by doing that, amend the Rules

for conducting public hearings. This is to make the online discussions in addition to traditional mode of public hearings and, therefore, enlarge the access to public hearings as such.

For the above we suggest the following:

1. Ensure the implementation of public hearings in virtual mode (in kind of a video conference), by employing accessible single platform.
2. Develop and post on the website of the National Aarhus Center a training manual on online technical communication skills to ease the access to selected unified platform.
3. Secure the availability of technical specialists and support at the side of the organizers/initiators of public hearings for its smooth online delivery. The contacts of technical support personnel should be available in the text of the hearings' announcement.
4. Promote the public hearings implementation in line with the requirements of the Rules for public hearings delivery, specifically, securing the provision of:
 - on time information on public hearings and participation opportunities;
 - technical aspects of connecting to videoconference;
 - information on approved chair, secretary and schedule of hearings;
 - opportunity to post questions and provide comments and suggestions;
 - protocol and recordings of public hearings on publicly accessible websites;
 - protocol amendment upon the results of the hearings.

The EcoForum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as a network of non-governmental organizations, is interested in further promoting the development of the most effective forms of public participation in full compliance with the norms and requirements of the UNECE Aarhus Convention.

We hope our suggestions will be taken for your thorough consideration and translated into specific actions, targeting to ensure transparent and accountable decision making.

Sincerely yours,

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On behalf of NGO Network
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