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Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters

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Item 11 of the provisional agenda

Discussion and adoption of the Declaration

Rio plus Aarhus — 20 years on: Bearing fruit and looking forward

Draft Chisinau Declaration

Proposal by the Bureau

1 We, the Ministers and heads of delegation from Parties and Signatories to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), together with representatives of other States, international, regional and non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians and other representatives of civil society throughout the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region and beyond, gathered at the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties, are convinced that environmental rights and democracy are essential elements of good governance and informed decision-making and a prerequisite for achieving the objective of sustainable development. Since the adoption of the Rio Declaration in 1992, and continuing through the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, we have seen a continued reinforcement of environmental democracy, including the adoption of the Aarhus Convention, its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, as well as the United Nations Environment Programme Guidelines for the Development of National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, which advance the Aarhus principles to the global level.

2. The Convention has strongly contributed to putting Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration into practice and has proved an effective tool for promoting public participation in environmental decision-making and access to information and justice in environmental matters. It will continue to do so through its various instruments, which include a rather

unique and efficient compliance mechanism, and through the transparent inclusion of civil society representatives. We recognize there are still considerable obstacles to overcome in order to achieve a full and balanced application of Principle 10 in the Aarhus family.

3. Worldwide, social, economic and environmental challenges are becoming increasingly complex and interrelated. This fact should not discourage the public from involvement in decision-making. Governments must provide the necessary stimulus, tools, information and assistance to enable informed public engagement that can contribute to balanced, qualified and transparent decision-making. Making decisions and decision-making processes fully accountable to the public whom they should serve should become essential, and not, as is still frequently observed today, seen as a formal procedural requirement, or even as an obstacle to desired actions.

I. Aarhus and green economy

4. The will and action of Governments and intergovernmental bodies to properly reflect public concerns needs to be matched by commitment and action on the part of the private sector in order for our path towards truly sustainable development to be successful. The notions of corporate social and environmental responsibility, transparency and accountability have steadily gained ground over the past 20 years. However, clear action is needed to mainstream its acceptance among the wider business community.

5. The recent economic crisis and recovery programmes can provide both an incentive and an opportunity to take a more sustainable path. Innovation and technological progress can contribute to reducing our ecological footprint, but by themselves they will not lead to sustainability and a better quality of life. The economic value of the environment and environmental impacts of today's actions must be fully reflected in all decisions at policy, strategic and project levels, particularly in the light of increasing pressure on resources for rapid global economic development and population growth. The social dimension of sustainable development, which has clear links with public participation in decision-making, should not be reduced to issues of employment or poverty, but should lead to truly inclusive and participatory societies.

6. Similarly to the greening of the economy, public participation in decision-making is not a self-standing objective, but rather an instrument for achieving the sustainability and well-being of society. We consider that, in line with Principle 10, citizens should be invited to participate in defining and implementing green economy programmes and in choosing the most appropriate road maps to sustainability.

II. Aarhus and environmental governance

7. Achieving good environmental decision-making at the national level is closely related to environmental governance at the global level. In this regard, we consider that the preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and its deliberations should serve as a model of how to implement Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, with a high level of public participation, including a wide range of stakeholders being given an opportunity to present their visions for a sustainable future.

8. While the last two decades have witnessed the adoption or upgrading of a range of important multilateral environmental instruments, including the Aarhus Convention itself, the efficiency of international governance on environmental matters could still be significantly improved. The environmental part of international policies remains arguably the weakest of the three pillars of sustainable development. Fragmented competencies of institutions responsible for implementation of multilateral environmental agreements and

their competition for limited financial and human resources are clearly important driving factors of this situation.

9. Improved coordination, effectiveness and a synergistic implementation of multilateral environmental instruments must continue to be a priority. The Aarhus Convention provides an opportunity in this regard, through its engagement with other multilateral agreements, as has been the case already through work on the promotion of public participation in international forums and the regular exchange of information on activities among convention secretariats.

10. However, the core of the integration of environmental concerns into other policy areas lies with public participation at the national level: the process of deciding on priorities, mandates and financial contributions for the range of international agendas, by no means limited to environmental policy, should not only be more efficiently coordinated, but also transparent, inclusive and accountable. When defining positions in relation to their international agenda, Governments should strive for sustainability and coherence and reflect the views of the public whom they represent. It is only in this way that multilateral diplomacy will be able to prove that it can actually deliver on today's challenges.

III. Looking ahead

11. We are aware that we owe it to future generations to minimize the depletion of environmental resources that should remain available to them. The children and youth of today are watching our steps, which will determine the quality of life for them and their children. We have a duty to serve by example in making the right choices.

12. We consider that our work in implementing the Aarhus Convention is paving the way for a universal application of Principle 10, and we offer to share our experience with all countries that wish to join the Aarhus family, to replicate its achievements or to be inspired by this most ambitious venture in environmental democracy undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations. We stand ready to contribute with the Aarhus Convention principles and achievements to the success and outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference.
