



***Aarhus Convention
in force
30 October 2001***



**WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT
THE AARHUS CONVENTION**

A compendium of statements from Governments, Intergovernmental
Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations
made upon the occasion of the
Convention's entry into force
30 October 2001

STATEMENTS FROM THE FOLLOWING:

United Nations Secretary-General
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNEP
European Commission

Armenia
Bulgaria
Croatia
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Denmark
Finland
Germany
Hungary
Ireland
Italy
Kazakhstan
Lithuania
Netherlands
Norway
Malta
Republic of Moldova
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Tajikistan
The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Ukraine
United Kingdom
Uzbekistan
Yugoslavia

World Conservation Union (IUCN)
Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC)
European ECO Forum
European Environmental Bureau
Stichting Natuur en Milieu
The Access Initiative
Environmental Management and Law Association (EMLA)
Interactive Health Ecology Access Links (IHEAL)
UNEP/GRID-Arendal

UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL

The Aarhus Convention is the most ambitious venture in environmental democracy undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations. Its adoption was a remarkable step forward in the development of international law as it relates to participatory democracy and citizens' environmental rights. Its entry into force today, little more than three years after it was adopted, is further evidence of the firm commitment to those principles of the Signatories -- including States in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, whose role in this process clearly demonstrates that environmental rights are not a luxury reserved for rich countries.

The active engagement of civil society -- both in the formulation of policies and in their implementation -- is a prerequisite for meaningful progress towards sustainable development. While governments can and must make decisions to pave the way, other stakeholders have a part to play.

And that is exactly what the Aarhus Convention is about. It aims to help strengthen citizens' environmental rights -- rights of access to information; rights to participate in decision-making; and rights to challenge decisions affecting the environment. It seeks to ensure that members of the public and their representative organizations can and do play a full and active role in bringing about the changes in consumption and production patterns which we so urgently need to build a sustainable society.

While there is much to celebrate today, let us also rededicate ourselves to meeting the challenges ahead. We must work to encourage Governments to amend national laws and procedures to bring them into compliance with the Convention. We must ensure that both officials and the public are equipped to translate the principles of the Convention into practice. And we must use next year's World Summit on Sustainable Development to strengthen our commitment to environmental rights -- not only in Europe but throughout the world.

These challenges can be met only through partnerships among many different actors -- policy makers and legislators, officials at all levels of government, the judiciary, NGOs, and of course the public. I am confident that the excellent co-operation among those stakeholders, which has characterized the Aarhus Convention process so far, will ensure your continued success.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

I wish to send my congratulations on the occasion of the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.

The Convention is a remarkable achievement not only in terms of protection of the environment, but also in terms of the promotion and protection of human rights, which lie at the heart of the text. As such, Aarhus is a key step in the process of integrating human rights and environmental issues which was affirmed at Rio and which is now accelerating. The speed with which this Convention entered into force is evidence of this progress. The Convention touches on the fundamental issues of democracy and the rights of people to protect their well-being and that of their children. Rights of access to information, to participate in decision-making processes and to complain and seek redress for injury: each of these rights are now seen as working not only to protect people, but also to protect the environment. Conversely, the protection of the environment is, as the preamble to the Convention puts so succinctly, 'essential to human well-being and the enjoyment of basic human rights, including the right to life itself'.

The great value of this Convention lies not only in the promise of protection it affords the people and the environment of Europe, but also in the model it provides for similar action in other nations and regions of the world. It is truly a trailblazer. In this regard, the entry into force we are celebrating today is a key signpost for the future of human rights and the environment in all parts of the world. In the lead-up to next year's UN Conference on Environment and Development in Johannesburg, Aarhus also provides a clear set of principles for the next decade in the area of information, participation and access to justice.

It is my hope that the Aarhus Convention will continue its remarkable ratification rate to date, and that it will influence the process of integrating human rights and the environment in other parts of the world. Upon all of us lie the common responsibilities of protecting and promoting human rights and of protecting the environment. This Convention is a clear indicator of how these responsibilities can be pursued concurrently.

Mary Robinson
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (UNEP)

"I wish to congratulate the Economic Commission for Europe for the entry into force today of the Aarhus Convention, the first legally binding instrument for access to information, public participation in decision-making and justice in environmental matters. Such an achievement is of global significance.

In the past several years, UNEP together with its partners, has intensified its efforts to meet the goals set out in the implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on environment and development, goals which are now firmly embedded in the Aarhus Convention.

At its twentieth Session in 1999, the UNEP Governing Council, in decision GC.20/4, requested UNEP to seek appropriate ways of building capacity in and enhancing access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters and to study various models of legislation, policies and guidelines. It also reaffirmed UNEP's global advocacy of the public-right-to-know principle (UNEP/GC.20/5.3).

It is gratifying to note that UNEP and the Economic Commission for Europe have joined forces and forged partnerships to implement the Convention through a number of training courses in Central and Eastern Europe for a variety of audiences. UNEP has also devoted the first issue of its TEENS magazine for the Youth to the implementation of the Convention.

Today is an important landmark for the environment. The Convention gives us a golden opportunity to pursue our environmental endeavors from the right approach, by making the issue of access to information, public participation in decision-making and justice in environmental matters an integral part of our agendas."

Dr. Klaus Töpfer,
Executive Director,
UNEP

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

“The Aarhus Convention constitutes a considerable step ahead in the way to democratic discussions, decision-making procedures and public involvement in the enforcement of environmental matters in an open society. The environment itself has no voice and nor do future generations. Therefore, instruments and procedures need to be developed to allow as broad a discussion on environmental concerns as any possible. By giving individual citizens and environmental organisations a right to be informed, a right to participate in environmental decision-making and a right on access to justice, the Aarhus Convention has established such mechanisms.

The greatest problem of any environmental legal text is its application, and the Aarhus Convention is no exception. We all know that it is one thing to fix human rights in a legal text and another to apply them day by day. The practical application of the principles of the Aarhus Convention will be consistently the yardstick with which the success of the Convention will be measured.

As European Environment Commissioner, I endeavour to transpose the Aarhus Convention into Community law so that its principles apply throughout the Community, including to Community institutions. I also intend to ensure that the principles of the Aarhus Convention are applied, in their words and in their spirit, in the daily practice within the Community. This will take time and will require a change of behaviour of many, citizens and administrations, local authorities and environmental organisations.

However, if our European society is an open society and wishes to remain one, we need to make the Aarhus principles part of our daily environmental policy.

The entry into force of the Aarhus Convention – worthy of celebration as it legitimately is – shall remind us of our joint important task to put its principles into practice.”

Margot Wallström
Member of the European Commission

BELGIUM on behalf the European Communities

STATEMENT BY THE EU ON THE OCCASION OF THE ENTRY INTO FORCE OF THE CONVENTION ON ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS

It is with great satisfaction that the EU welcomes the entry into force of the Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters.

Indeed, this major event – that we celebrate today – marks the outcome of significant legislative efforts on three important legal rights, which vividly express the concern to protect the environment for improved quality of life and for better health in full compliance with Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, adopted at the Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

On this occasion, the EU would like to express its appreciation for the work done by the different Task Forces and Working Groups established in the framework of the Convention. The work accomplished so far by the various working groups allowed to make considerable progress by crystallizing various essential points related to the Convention, either through the exchange of experience (in respect of electronic tools or access to justice, for example) or by establishing ad hoc instruments designed to materialize some provisions of the Convention, such as compliance or the development of a pollutant register.

This day also marks a beginning, in that the vitality of the exercise of the 3 important legal rights of the Convention will undoubtedly influence political development within the UN-ECE region, beyond the environment sector. It is clear that these rights created by the Aarhus Convention will become a basic reference for all citizens of the pan-European area consisting of more than 50 countries.

In addition, the EU recalls its earlier statements that the Aarhus Convention may attract public attention, beyond the ECE-region, and underlines Art. 19, para 3 of the Convention that also other Members of the United Nations may accede to the Convention.

The EU strongly supports this Convention. Several member states have recently announced to financially support the secretariat.

Through the TACIS-programme, an amount of 2,7 million Euro should help to assure the speedy application of the Convention.

It is also clear that the experience gathered in the Aarhus Convention will be of relevance for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

As a conclusion, the EU wishes to reiterate its determination to ratify the Aarhus Convention as soon as possible so as to offer the public a guarantee that they will be able to exercise their rights in respect of information, participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters.

ARMENIA

***Приветствие г-на Вардана Айвазяна, министра охраны природы
Армении, по случаю вступления в силу Орхусской Конвенции***

Орхусская конвенция является знаменем позитивных тенденций современного общества. Этот международный правовой документ, в котором закреплены права граждан на информированность и доступ к правосудию в вопросах окружающей среды, вселяет надежду на дальнейшее развитие демократических процессов в странах с переходной экономикой.

Мои поздравления и пожелание успеха КОНВЕНЦИИ.

Unofficial translation:

“The Aarhus Convention represents the sign of positive tendencies of contemporary society. This international legislative document that stipulates public rights of access to information and justice in environmental matters is the inspiration for the further development of the democratic process in the countries with economies in transition.

My congratulations and wishes of success to the Convention.”

Vardan Aivazyan,
Minister of the Environment
Republic of Armenia

BULGARIA

“On behalf of the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water, I would like to congratulate you with the entry into force of Aarhus Convention. We consider it to be great success for the environmental protection as well as for the development of the democratic processes.

Access to information, public participation in the decision-making and access to justice are an indispensable pre-requisite for the sustainable and successful solution of environmental problems not only on regional, national and local level but also on global level in a future perspective.

In our country we are working hard for the harmonization of our legislation and for the implementation of our National Program on the implementation of the Aarhus Convention’s principles. Thus we believe, in the near future, Bulgaria will be ready to stand among the countries which have ratified the Convention.”

Nelly Ilieva
Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria

CROATIA

«The entry into force of the Aarhus Convention is a historical landmark and an unprecedented example of the international community's successful quest towards more effective protection of the environment.

For a long time, it was clear that all elements of society must work together to find meaningful solutions to today's complex environmental problems, and the Aarhus Convention is indeed a very powerful tool for achieving this goal.

We can all agree that the Aarhus Convention will change the *environmental* world.

I am taking this opportunity to inform you that Croatia is now involved in a number of activities preceding the ratification of the Aarhus Convention. We are fully aware of the complexity of the task that is in front of us. We sincerely hope we shall be able to accomplish it by the end of next year.

May I congratulate those few but brave who had the vision and courage to launch and make this unique piece of international environmental legislation operative.

In particular, I wish to congratulate Mr Kaj Bärlund, the Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention and its other bodies, for commitment to achieving this goal - the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention.»

Bozo Kovacevic
Minister of Environmental Protection and Physical Planning
Croatia

CYPRUS

“On behalf of the Cyprus Government and the people of Cyprus, I would like to express my deep appreciation for the efforts that have culminated in the entering into force of the Aarhus Convention.

It is indeed the most ‘ambitious venture’ in the area of environmental democracy, since it is the first time that environment is so closely linked to human rights. The Convention gives the right to civil society not only to be informed about environmental issues and have access to related information, but also to be involved and participate in decision-making procedures and to resort to Courts.

The Republic of Cyprus, being very sensitive to human rights, pluralism, democracy and responsible governance, has signed the Aarhus Convention and has initiated the procedure of ratifying it. A law has also been passed for the freedom of access to environmental information.”

Mr. Costas Themistocleous

Minister of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment

Cyprus

CZECH REPUBLIC

“Let me express my congratulations on this extremely important milestone for the entire UNECE region. The Aarhus Convention is an instrument of a new quality, strongly supporting democratic principles that are necessary for having our future more sustainable and more safe for next generations. I would like to appreciate the work done by you and your colleagues towards this great contribution that opens the door to a new model of partnership, a new style of communication among all parts of civic society in our countries.

It is obvious, that proper functioning of such important instrument requires much time and effort made in the preparatory phase. From this perspective, the Aarhus Convention has served in my Country as a great stimulation to have our environmental legislation even more democratic. I am proud to inform you that after having adopted the necessary changes in our legal framework (for example a new Act on EIA), we started the ratification of the Aarhus Convention in the Parliament of the Czech Republic. I do hope that the Czech Republic will become the Party of the Aarhus Convention by the end of this year.”

Milos Kuzvart
Minister of the Environment
of the Czech Republic

DENMARK

“The entering into force of the Århus Convention is a giant step forward in developing the field of ‘environmental democracy’ in international law.

The significance of the Convention is global, and all countries and their citizens participating are winners.

Denmark finds the need for a global framework for strengthening citizens’ environmental rights more important than ever in our search for sustainable development.

And the Århus Convention on environmental democracy will no doubt have a far-reaching impact on the ECE-region.”

Svend Auken
Minister of Environment and Energy
Denmark

FINLAND

"The date of the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention marks a special day in the development of international environmental law.

Indeed, the Convention represents a new approach in the machinery of environmental instruments. The provisions on access to information, public participation and access to justice will further the legitimacy and transparency of environmental decision-making in the ECE region.

Moreover, the Convention will serve as a model for other regions in the implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration. Let me take this opportunity to convey my sincere congratulations for this remarkable achievement."

Satu Hassi
Minister of the Environment
Finland

GERMANY

“I should like to extend my congratulations to the UNECE and those states which have contributed to the early entry into force of the Aarhus Convention.

With the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention, the UNECE set new standards for the transparency of administrative decisions and public participation in the field of environmental protection. Access to information was broadened and geared to the possibilities offered by modern information technology. The rights of the public to participate in licensing and planning decisions with relevance for the environment were strengthened. Citizens and associations now were guaranteed effective access to justice if they see a need to review administrative decisions on environmental matters. This Convention ensures that citizens can make more effective use of their democratic rights of participation in the field of environmental protection.

The German Federal Government too has committed itself to the goals of the Aarhus Convention and will, in close co-ordination with the law-making activities of the European community, work for swift ratification of the Convention.”

Jürgen Trittin

Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety
Germany

HUNGARY

“Let me welcome you on behalf of the Ministry of Environment in Hungary. First of all, let me say thank you for the work of those Hungarian governmental and non-governmental organizations, which have taken part in the process of ratification of the Aarhus Convention.

We commemorated the revolution of 1956 just a week ago, on 23 October. The revolution fought for an independent and democratic Hungary. As the revolution was defeated, we were not able to implement our ideas. Only 10 years after the change of our political regime and on the threshold of the European Union we are capable of doing so.

That is why the ratification of the Convention is of great importance. Our legislation and rules of law harmonize with the regulations of the Convention. The ratification and implementation of it will serve not only the case of our environmental protection but our democracy as well.

The Hungarian Parliament accepted the Convention with a majority vote on 29 May 2001. (The proportional number of votes showed a very positive direction as 267 representatives of the Parliament voted for and only 2 voted against it.) While preparing the ratification of the Convention we have taken all practical and personnel issues into account. So far, we have succeeded in achieving the following results:

- preparing a rule of law for the implementation of the PRTR system;
- operating a Public Information Desk at our regional institutions and in the Ministry of Environment;
- supporting the network of Information Offices run by NGOs.

We need to facilitate the practical implementation of the Convention, too:

- we need to develop the information network of Environmental Inspectorates, National Parks;
- we have to assure the modern, computerized background for national and international flow of information through operating and maintaining the EIONET.

It is also important that the public should get to know their rights and opportunities through the Convention. We lay a big emphasis on the appropriate co-operation with non-governmental organizations, which contributes a lot to the implementation of the Convention.

At the birth of the Convention, a lot of you may have agreed with us thinking that the economically, socially and politically most developed European countries would be the first ones to ratify it. But it is not the case. Several countries from among the 16 ones to ratify it first are just about to rebuild their economic and political systems. I am convinced that the Aarhus Convention provides a lot of support for them from a political and economic point of view.

Last but not least I would like to thank you for organizing this event and let me wish you much success in implementing the Convention.”

Dr. Béla Turi-Kovács
Minister of Environment
Hungary

IRELAND

“The coming into force of the Aarhus Convention demonstrates the commitment of the international community to involving people in decisions that affect their daily lives. I congratulate the UNECE on reaching this significant milestone.

In Ireland, we already have extensive public participation in environmental decision-making, supported by wide access to environmental information through “ENFO”. We propose to ratify the Aarhus Convention in 2002.”

Noel Dempsey TD
Minister of the Environment
Ireland

ITALY

“I am delighted to see that, little more than three years after it was adopted, the Aarhus Convention is coming of age. Congratulations to all those who have worked hard for this result! Thanks to the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention, a fundamental step towards public awareness of environmental matters, transparency and involvement of the civil society has been achieved.

The Aarhus Convention is the world’s most progressive instrument promoting the rights of people to play an active part in the creation of a more environmentally sustainable society. Italy will continue to promote the Convention as a leading model for the implementation of principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, especially in the preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development that will take place in Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2002.

Italy has been happy to serve as chair of the Meeting of the Signatories to the Convention and will be glad to continue supporting the Aarhus process in the most appropriate ways.

As the second EU State to have ratified the Convention, we are engaged within the EU in a process of alignment of EC law with the provisions of the Convention in order to open the way to ratification of the Convention by the European Community.

We are also active in the promotion of local initiatives of public involvement in the framework of “local Agendas 21”, according to which activities to be undertaken by municipalities are discussed and decided with citizens in a consultation forum.

Italy strongly believes in the key role played by the public, both at individual and associated level, in the protection of the environment. We believe that the recognition of precise citizens’ rights, as stated by the Convention, will produce an increase in environmentally friendly behaviour, opportunities for the public to affect the decision-making process, transparency and democracy.

We appreciate the efforts made by Parties, Signatories and the Secretariat and would like to congratulate again all those who have worked hard for this result. We also hope that Countries having not signed or ratified the Convention will soon join us in such a commitment for environmental democracy.”

MR. ALTERO MATTEOLI
MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT
ITALY

KAZAKHSTAN

“On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, I would like to congratulate the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Secretariat and Bureau of the Aarhus Convention, governments of European and NIS countries, non-governmental, public and international organizations on this remarkable occurrence – entry into force of the Aarhus Convention.

Sustainable development is impossible without ensuring personal freedom and the right to have access to reliable environmental information. Therefore, we can regard the signing and ratification of the Aarhus Convention by European and NIS countries, and its entry into force, as the acknowledgement of their adherence and commitment to the principles of democracy and publicity.

The Aarhus provisions are in accordance with the 10th principles of the Rio-de-Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development, and implementation of the Aarhus Convention in European and NIS countries can serve the evidence of practical compliance with the Rio-de-Janeiro Declaration at the European level.

Capacity building for development of partnership relations among all the stakeholders (public and NGOs, legislative and executive powers) will guarantee democratic development of the society, realization of the rights to have access to reliable information, given by national and international laws, and, finally, sustainable human development. In this regard, the Aarhus Convention imposes considerable obligations on the countries that have ratified it.

Having ratified the Aarhus Convention in October 2000, Kazakhstan, on the one hand, has accrued the right to obtain international assistance to implement the Convention. At the same time, as a Party to the Convention, Kazakhstan should implement its obligations and involve all the concerned parties in the process, and we are aware of this.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the world community for the assistance and support it provides to Kazakhstan to facilitate the progress of democratic and sustainable development.

I am fully confident that the fruitful co-operation between Kazakhstan and the UNECE in addressing environmental problems will move further forward on a sustainable basis.”

Andar Shukputov
Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection
Kazakhstan

LITHUANIA

“In welcoming the 30th October 2001 as the day when the Aarhus Convention enters into force, we congratulate all governmental institutions, international non-governmental organizations, the Secretariat of UN Economic Commission for Europe and others actively involved in working towards the development, promotion and enforcement of the Convention.

On 10 July 2001, Lithuania ratified the Aarhus Convention and, like other Parties to the Convention, considers the Convention the most far-reaching instrument promoting democracy, strengthening citizens' environmental rights and improving co-operation between members of the public and governmental institutions. Furthermore, the Convention opens up new possibilities to all people who feel responsible for and want to take an active part in the protection of environment.

Lithuanian governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations are delighted to be a part of the Aarhus Convention's family in the ECE region. They look forward to the further strengthening of the co-operation between its members to promote the implementation of the Aarhus Convention's guidelines, its main principles of transparency and accountability, in order to ensure sustainable and environmentally sound development of society.”

Arunas Kundrotas
Minister of the Environment
Lithuania

Malta

“Malta has already transformed the obligations of the Convention into its national legislation and will ratify the Convention by the end of the year.

This Convention is a breakthrough in the evolution of international environmental law. The duty to inform is no longer, only a duty which States have towards each other when any action which occurs within their territory, is likely to have an impact on the environment of other States. This Convention goes one gigantic step further: it bestows upon Governments the duty to inform their citizens by providing them with any information they may wish to inquire upon the state of the environment.

The Aarhus Convention is the fulfilment of Agenda 21’s recommendation to involve all stake holders in the national decision making process, to ensure that development is environmentally sustainable.”

Dr Francis Zammit Dimech
Minister for the Environment
Malta

NETHERLANDS

“The Aarhus Convention is a big step forward in the protection of the right of every citizen to a clean and healthy environment. The Netherlands presided over the negotiations on first the Sofia Guidelines and then the Convention. I am pleased with the result. It is an important contribution to the sustainability of the environment and environmental policy.

I hope that the Convention will serve as an inspiration, even beyond Europe and in other domains than the environment. We are working hard for its ratification, and until it is ratified, we will conduct ourselves as if it were already in force.”

Jan Pronk
Minister of Housing and Spatial Planning
Netherlands

NORWAY

“The Aarhus Convention constitutes a major achievement in international environmental law. It represents a re-orientation of this field of law in the sense that it focuses on the role of individuals and NGOs, and the contribution they can make in our common effort to achieve sustainable development. Moreover, the Aarhus Convention confirms the important link that exists between protection of human rights and protection of the environment.

The adoption of the Convention has led to a number of new initiatives in Norway in order to further strengthen rights related to access to environmental information, participation in decision-making processes, and access to justice. Norway intends to ratify the convention in the near future, as soon as necessary measures have been adopted.”

Børge Brende
Minister of the Environment
Norway

Republic of Moldova

"I would like to congratulate the Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention and all contracting Parties with entering into force of the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.

Moldova was the first country that has ratified this convention and we are proud that other countries followed our example.

We would like to express our willing to collaborate in the future with all contracting Parties, observance and other interested organizations in order to implement and develop the goals and objectives of this convention."

Mr. Gheorghe Duca
Minister of Ecology, Construction and Territorial Development,
Republic of Moldova

ROMANIA

“Romania, as a country in a deep reform process, is interested to promote policies aimed at a human equilibrium co-operation, including public participation and information. Romania was among the first countries that signed the Aarhus Convention, and has ratified it through the Law 86/2000. This law is currently in a deep process of enforcement of its legal provisions.

Romania recognizes the right of the people for a healthy environment and guarantees, in this sense, the freedom of access to information on environmental quality. I appreciate the UN/ECE special support for the promotion of the Convention principles and I would like to express my confidence for an intensified sustainable development of the environmental factors, for a favorable framework of free access to information and for a real partnership in order to conserve this common inestimable heritage.

Environment is and should be furthermore a peaceful and secure instrument both for the states as for their people in a world in which pollution and deterioration of environmental factors become one of the most redoubtable human enemies.”

Aurel Constantin ILIE
Minister of Waters and Environmental Protection

SLOVAKIA

“On behalf of the citizens of the Slovak Republic, let me congratulate all Europeans and especially express gratitude to all who assisted in the birth of this breakthrough document. The Aarhus Convention marks a significant shift towards an environmentally responsible society. The Aarhus Convention is a tool for creating third generation citizenship rights, allowing access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters, bringing these environmental issues to the level of other fundamental rights. The open Europe has become reality; the idea has been implemented.

The Slovak Republic wants to confirm its full participation in modern Europe and prepare its citizens as future active members of unified Europe. The Slovak Republic is joining the efforts of the signatories by creating the conditions aimed at promotion of responsibility, transparency and openness towards the public. The government of the Slovak Republic will discuss very soon "The proposal for measures to accede to the Aarhus Convention", from which the particular tasks arise, thus leading to changes in legislation in order to meet the criteria of the Convention pillars leading to an open, inclusive and environmentally responsible society. The Slovak Republic has an existing system for interaction of the government with the public, and implementation of the Aarhus Convention will strengthen this system. The Slovak Republic already has the first pillar of the Convention in its Act on free access to information, which entered into force on 1 January 2001. This Act replaced an existing Act on access to environmental information in Slovakia which was the first such Act in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Slovak Republic is confident that by implementing the Aarhus Convention, Europe has again confirmed the values of democracy and human rights and gives hope of sustainable development for the whole world.”

Prof. László Miklós
Minister of Environment of Slovak Republic

SLOVENIA

“On the occasion of the entering into force of the Aarhus Convention (Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters), which will actually happen on 30 October this year, I would like to thank you and all your colleagues for all endeavours undertaken in order to bring to life this important document of the new era.

Time and implementation experience will show the pioneering far-sighted dimension of this Convention which concerns us all, governmental and non-governmental side, and I hope that both sides will be up to fulfilling this ambitious task in front of us. I am aware that a lot of efforts in awareness-raising of different target groups will be needed to actually live the spirit of the Aarhus Convention.

As the minister, as well as a citizen, I am glad that the Convention will enter into force next week, and I hope that Slovenia will join the Aarhus Club very soon.”

Janez Kopac
Minister of the Environment and Spatial Planning
Republic of Slovenia

SPAIN

Declaración del Ministro de Medio Ambiente de España con motivo de la entrada en vigor del Convenio de Aarhus.

La entrada en vigor del Convenio sobre el acceso a la información, la participación del público en la toma de decisiones y el acceso a la justicia en materia de medio ambiente, firmado en el marco de la Comisión Económica para Europa, de Naciones Unidas, permitirá coordinar los esfuerzos de numerosos países de nuestra área geográfica para mejorar las políticas y actuaciones públicas en favor del medio ambiente.

Las Administraciones públicas de España (Estado, Gobiernos Regionales, Administración Local) están realizando un importante esfuerzo para desarrollar la principal innovación del Convenio: la difusión de la información medioambiental (textos legales, Planes y Programas, informes sobre la situación del medio ambiente, etc.), a través de medios electrónicos como Internet.

El Ministerio de Medio Ambiente está participando activamente en el proceso de modificación de las Directivas de la Unión Europea, que afectan al derecho de acceso del público a la información disponible por las Administraciones públicas y a la participación pública en materia de medio ambiente. A su vez, también ha iniciado el proceso de modificación de la vigente legislación nacional en la materia, con el fin de poder ratificar y, en consecuencia, aplicar de manera adecuada el Convenio.

A la vista de lo expuesto, el Gobierno español ha previsto ratificar el Convenio de Aarhus durante el segundo semestre del año 2002.

Excmo. Sr. D. Jaume Matas I Palou
Ministro de Medio Ambiente de España

Unofficial translation

Statement by the Environment Minister of Spain on the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention

The entry into force of the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, adopted within the framework of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, will help to co-ordinate the efforts of many countries in our geographical region to improve environmental policy and action.

Spain's public authorities (State, Regional Governments, Local Authorities) are making a significant effort to develop the Convention's main innovation, namely the dissemination of environmental information (legal texts, plans and programmes, reports on the state of the environment, etc.) through electronic means like the Internet.

The Environment Ministry is taking an active part in the work to revise the European Union's Directives on the public's right to access information available to the public authorities and on public participation in environmental matters. The Ministry has also started to revise applicable national legislation on this subject, so that Spain can ratify the Convention and then implement it effectively.

Consequently, the Spanish Government expects to ratify the Aarhus Convention during the second half of 2002.

D. Jaume Matas i Palou
Minister of Environment
Spain

SWEDEN

“Information for decision-making and public participation as well as access to judicial and administrative proceedings is a theme of critical relevance for sustainable development. It has several important components. One concerns the collection, aggregation and analysis of data that we, as decision-makers, need in order to make informed policy choices. Another is to provide access to information and participation of all those concerned and of all who may contribute to sustainable development.

The Aarhus Convention, which is the result of ambitious efforts for a long period of time, is a historical step. The Convention gives hope for the future when it comes to involving the citizens in environmental matters. We should now all make every effort to ratify the Convention as soon as possible. In Sweden, the Government intends to present a proposal for ratification to Parliament before the end of this year.

I am convinced that future generations will remember what happened on the 30 October 2001!”

Kjell Larsson
Minister of Environment
Sweden

Tajikistan

“Taking into consideration the importance of the main tasks and the Convention’s requirements, Tajikistan ratified this Convention in June 2001, and is developing different measures for realisation of the Convention.

I think that the implementation of the Aarhus Convention wil play the main role for the process of democratisation as in the world so in our country.

I hope for further close collaboration for realization of the Convention in Tajikistan and in the region of Central Asia.”

Usmonkul Shokirov

Minister for Nature Protection

Republic of Tajikistan

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

“The Republic of Macedonia would like to express its great pleasure on the occasion of entering into force of the Convention for Access to Information, Public Participation in the Decision Making and Access to the Justice on Environmental Matters, known as the Aarhus Convention.

Our country was among the first to sign and ratify the Convention, thus expressing its attitude about the importance and the priority status of this Convention for the Republic of Macedonia. The Convention principles enable strong stimulus for building a citizenship-democratic concept in the domain of environment management and protection, a path, which our country determinately follows in its Euro and North-Atlantic integration processes. It is basic to understand that in the creation and development of the democratic society towards which the Republic of Macedonia aims, the democracy and the public are two coordinated items, mutually related and conditioned, so that there is no democracy without active public, just as there could not be active public without democracy.

The Republic of Macedonia sends the most sincere greetings on the occasion of this important happening, with hope for further successful implementation of the Aarhus Convention principles in the ECE region.

Vladimir Dzabirski,
Minister of Environment and Physical Planning
of the Republic of Macedonia

UKRAINE

“Let me congratulate you on behalf of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources of Ukraine with outstanding achievement – less than 3 years after the Aarhus Convention was adopted, 17 countries ratified it – so we celebrate today its entry into force!

To an extent unprecedented in UN history, an NGO coalition actively participated in the process from the beginning of negotiations on the Convention, and we have experienced just how productive and beneficial to all such participation can be.

The day that the Aarhus Convention enters into force is a great day for the environment. But it is also a great day for democracy – not just representative democracy, but a new and more participatory form of democracy in which the crucial role of many social actors is recognized.

The Aarhus Convention is unique in many ways. It is the first example in international environmental legislation which set up obligations not only between governments of the countries, but between governments and public. It is a prominent tool which guarantees the realization of citizens’ environmental rights. Finally, it shapes a new culture of dialogue involving Governments, the public and individuals aimed at building the environmental pillar of sustainable development. The Convention provides the necessary framework for raising public awareness and involvement without which the transformation to environmentally balanced development is impossible.

I would like to say some special words to those keepers of the Aarhus Convention Spirit, who went on a long and difficult road to make today’s celebration happened.

UNECE secretariat could be justifiably proud of this unprecedented regional achievement, which is also an important contribution to the 2002 World Summit of Sustainable Development as an example of an instrument implementing Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration.

Countries which were continuously supporting and developing Convention could be justly called “Pioneers of environmental democracy”. Ukraine belongs to these, as we were the second country in the region to have ratified the Convention. The NGO Coalition and its Public Participation Campaign Committee deserved top praise for their enormous efforts and their great contribution to the process and to the content of the Convention itself. And I definitely would like to greet everybody who feels ownership with the Aarhus Convention’s development, ratification and implementation, and to extend the circle of owners far from UN ECE region - because the principles of the Aarhus Convention have absolutely universal value for all people in the world and serve the goals of a sustainable future.

Coming back to our region, I would like to say that the Aarhus Convention implementation is not going to be an easy task, especially for the countries in transition, where democracy is still very young and environmental problems are daunting. But I am sure we will all work together in partnership to overcome any obstacles.

Ukraine, as host country of the Fifth Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe” in 2003, would like to see public participation issues high on the agenda in Kyiv, including public participation in international environmental decision-making.”

Serhii Kurykin
Minister of the Environment and
Natural Resources, Ukraine

UNITED KINGDOM

“I am delighted that the Convention has come into force so quickly. The progress made since I and other Ministers signed the Aarhus Convention in 1998 has been extremely impressive. It is clear that the Convention is an important instrument which does as much for human rights as it does for creating a framework for achieving sustainable development. It deserves our strong support.

For a country, ratifying the Convention is an important step and it is something that the UK will do as soon as possible. I think that the real challenge though is to avoid a gap between the words of the Convention and the day-to-day practice on the ground. To provide insurance against this, I believe that we need an effective compliance mechanism for the Convention. It must help countries put laws and procedures in place which guarantee citizens the rights that they have been promised. Of course it is not an easy task but if the enthusiasm shown to date in the Aarhus arena continues, I am sure that we can achieve this. I am very pleased that the UK has been able to support the Convention in these areas.

Congratulations to all concerned for their hard work in bringing Aarhus into force today. I wish you the very best of luck for the challenges ahead.”

Michael Meacher
Minister of State for the Environment
United Kingdom

UZBEKISTAN

«Узбекистан в настоящее время не является участником Орхусской Конвенции. Тем не менее, она вызывает неподдельный интерес государственных органов и общественности Республики Узбекистан.

Отдельные её положения (касающиеся участия общественности в принятии экологически значимых решений, доступа к экологической информации) уже сейчас используются в текущем законодательстве в качестве одних из главных условий обеспечения экологических прав граждан, а другие – являются объектом осмысления.

Поздравляю Стороны Конвенции и широкую общественность с открытием новых возможностей в защите окружающей среды.»

Председатель Государственного комитета
Республики Узбекистан по охране природы

Халиллулла Шеримбетов

Unofficial translation:

“At present, Uzbekistan is not a Party to the Aarhus Convention. Nevertheless, the Convention stimulates a great interest for state and public organizations of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Some provisions of the Convention (access to information and public participation in decision-making in environmental matters), as being the main stipulation for providing public environmental rights, are already taken into account in the process of designing the law. Other provisions are under consideration.

Congratulations to the Parties to the Convention and to the public with the new perspectives for the environmental protection.”

Mr. Halilulla Sherimbetov

Chairman of State Committee for Environment of
the Republic of Uzbekistan

Yugoslavia

"On behalf of Directorate for Environmental Protection of Government of Serbia, I am glad that Aarhus Convention is entering into force. Although FR Yugoslavia did not sign Convention and has not acceded to it, the new environmental policy of Serbia is starting to integrate Aarhus "thinking" in the agenda for building up a new legal system for environmental and natural resources protection. Having in mind that the Aarhus Convention is the basic instrument in the field of environment and that it is very much connected with democracy and human rights issues, we expect that the minimum standards introduced by the Aarhus Convention will be accepted in region in general. I wish that FR Yugoslavia will soon formally join Aarhus Convention Parties and fully apply its provisions."

In the spirit of cooperation,

Andjelka Mihajlov,
PhD Chem. Eng
Director General of Directorate for
Environmental Protection
Ministry for Health and Environmental
Protection of Serbia
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

The World Conservation Union - IUCN

IUCN, the World Conservation Union, wishes to express its congratulations to all who were involved with the development and entry into force of the *UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters* – the *Aarhus Convention* - on October 30, 2001.

This Convention is of special significance for a number of reasons. It represents a major step toward fulfilling Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, which proclaims that “environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level,” and the implementation of the Convention will also lead to sound “environmental democracies” throughout the ECE-region.

The Convention has created an indelible link between human rights and the right to environmentally related information, public participation and access to justice. This makes it the first multilateral environmental agreement to impose obligations on its Parties *vis-à-vis* their own citizens, which gives it even greater significance.

It is also noteworthy that the majority of Eastern European and Central Asian States played a very constructive role in the deliberations leading up to the adoption of the Convention and were among the first to take all possible steps toward implementation before the Convention’s entry into force. It is hoped that numerous other states will choose to ratify the Convention in the very near future.

The Convention is significant for IUCN, but even more so for IUCN NGO members in the region, as it represents a momentous opportunity to become better informed, which will inevitably increase participation in the decision-making process. The “crucial role” of environmental NGOs in the development of the Convention was widely acknowledged and they have pledged to continue to play a key role in its implementation.

IUCN, through its unique composition of State Members, governmental agencies and NGOs is testimony to effective cooperation between civil society and government and the IUCN will be delighted to share the experience it has gained over the past 50 years. In addition, the many experts in the global voluntary networks of IUCN, in particular those in the Commission on Environmental Law, are already actively supporting efforts toward implementing the Convention.

Finally, IUCN wishes to extend its thanks to all of the governments involved in the work leading up to the adoption of the Aarhus Convention, and the UN Economic Commission for Europe for successfully initiating and shepherding this important venture. Hopefully other regions of the world will soon follow Europe’s example in adopting similar agreements.”

Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC)

“The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention and in its name all the Signatories, Parties and the public of the ECE region on the occasion of its entry into force. The adoption of the Convention at the 4th Ministerial Conference in Aarhus, June 1998, was a historical achievement demonstrating the high priority the countries of the UN ECE region give to promotion of transparency and participatory approach to environmental decision-making. The very short time within which the Convention enters into force indicates the historic importance of its content and the novelty of the principles embedded in it. It also shows the great amount of work carried out on the national level by many ECE countries to ensure early ratification and implementation of the instrument. The numerous efforts of governments, international organizations, NGOs and the Secretariat put into various initiatives called for by the Signatories over the last three years have contributed to making this exciting progress possible.

Our experience, -as that of an international organization working on public participation issues, the early ratification and implementation of the Aarhus Convention in the 15 countries of Central and Eastern Europe,- leads us to believe that the Aarhus Convention is considered as a priority international environmental agreement by the governments and NGOs of many countries in the region.

The adoption of the Convention in 1998 triggered the creation of new laws as well as revisions and amendments in the existing national legal frameworks leading to an improved transparency and openness of governance, more extensive rights for the public for access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters and opportunities to use these rights in practice, and through all these, greater public awareness on environmental issues.

We would like to stress the importance of the work carried out by all the Working Groups and Task Forces under the Convention. The development of international legally binding norms,- notably, in the form of a protocol to the Aarhus Convention -, to establish pollutant release and transfer registers, and to regulate the rights of the public to access to information and public participation in decision-making on GMO matters are crucial to the successful implementation of the Convention’s provisions on the national level, and so as is the work on non-binding instruments and tools that will help to implement provisions on access to information and access to justice. There is a strong need to strengthen the third pillar of the convention, access to justice and its more efficient, timely and equitable implementation, without which the rights under the Convention will only remain promises.

We believe, the Aarhus Convention is a major UN ECE contribution to the development of principles of participatory democracy and sustainable development in the region and to the Rio Principles, and we wish it a full success in its further active development and implementation.”

European ECO Forum

“Congratulations on this important day - both to the UNECE and its staff, and to all those countries which have ratified or acceded to the Convention! This is a great boost for everyone working for citizens’ environmental rights, including NGOs. We are delighted that seventeen countries are now Parties. Let’s celebrate again when ALL countries in the UNECE region have joined the Aarhus Club!

It is of course my hope that many citizens in the region will now begin to use their newly won rights and discover that their voices can both help to safeguard and improve our environment and build a more democratic Europe. There has been much hard work in the past, and we also recognize that there will be much more in the future as we work on the practical implementation. NGOs have an important role - indeed a responsibility - to help put the principles of the Convention into practice both by using the Convention ourselves and by helping others to use the Convention. NGOs should use their skills to help interpret laws, to help us all find ways of encouraging public participation, to help monitor the results and to contribute to improvements at all levels. The Convention provides a foundation only: now we need to build a thriving and lively society that values its citizens’ input. Let’s all keep learning from one another how to put environmental democracy into action.”

Mary Taylor

Public Participation Coordinator

European ECO Forum

EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL BUREAU

“The entry into force of the Aarhus Convention on October 30, 2001 is a moment of satisfaction for environmental organisations in the entire UN-ECE region. Since 11 years we have been campaigning on the pan-European level for a legally binding document that would establish concrete rights of citizens to get engaged into environmental policy making and enforcement. We appreciate the role of the UN-ECE and in particular some lead countries in taking up this issue after the Earth Summit agreed on Rio Principle 10.

The UN-ECE work, first on the Sofia Guidelines, later on the Aarhus Convention, was characterised by openness and recognition of the role of environmental organisations in the preparatory process. While we regretted the weaknesses in the final result, we have become strong advocates of the Convention. We campaign for its ratification and accession in the entire pan-European region, as well as in regional and international bodies. We will not be satisfied with introduction in national laws only. Full implementation needs recognition by authorities at all levels of the need to encourage, stimulate and the actual use of the rights laid down in the Convention. As European Environmental Bureau, we taken part in the ongoing campaign to make this happen, in the current EU, in the accession countries, as well as on the level of the European Institutions themselves.

Quite important is to recognise the scope of "environmental information and decisionmaking". Natural resources form the material base for our societies, and sectoral as well as general economic and financial policies may affect this base. So environmental authorities and environmental citizens organisations share the challenge to achieve institutional awareness and reform throughout the administrations as well as involvement of other interest groups.

The Convention is not finished. It is a strong basis, but several additions have to be made. I am satisfied that the Signatories of the Convention did take up this work so quickly, with inclusion of the demands from the environmental movement. While we disagree often on the needed content of the Protocols (on PRTR and SEA), the compliance regime and inclusion of GMOs in the Convention, I strongly feel that with the UN-ECE and the Environment Ministries we are together working on an instrument that is indispensable for sustainable development and participatory democracy, and example for the rest of the world.

Finally, I would like to call upon all those countries that have not ratified yet, as well as the European Community, to speed up this process, so that from next year on the Conference of Parties will be in its full strength.”

John Hontelez
Secretary General European Environmental Bureau

EEB is the largest European federation of (currently 141) environmental citizens organisations (in currently 27 countries)

Stichting Natuur en Milieu

“The Aarhus Convention is the most significant international achievement in the field of environmental rights of recent years and its entry into force is a milestone to be celebrated.

The Aarhus Convention is significant not just for the new standards it sets for the rights of the public in environmental matters, but also for the way it was negotiated.

The standards the Convention sets for the rights of public access to information, the opportunity to participate in decision-making, and the right to challenge decisions will work to the benefit of the public across Europe - not just in countries where such rights have yet to be firmly established but also in countries with existing laws on these subjects.

It is worth recalling that the Aarhus Convention is the result of an extraordinary, and extraordinarily successful, experiment in multilateral cooperation between governments and environmental organisations. The Convention negotiations were open to the participation of environmental organisations and they served, in many cases, as the driving force behind the negotiations. This experiment deserves to be replicated in other international environmental negotiations.

Entry into force will hopefully also accelerate ratification by the European Community and those member states where ratification is not yet complete.”

Ralph Hallo
President of the EEB and Coordinator
of the International Program at Stichting
Natuur en Milieu, Netherlands.

THE ACCESS INITIATIVE

“The Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters will enter into force on October 30. We congratulate UNECE governments and urge them to ratify and implement the provisions of the Convention. We also urge the non-UNECE governments to look for inspiration in the Aarhus Convention and to create national policies and practices to ensure public access to decision-making.

We believe that the Aarhus Convention is a vital statement of environmental democracy and human rights, and that it points the way towards government that is more open, participatory, and accountable to all citizens and to decision-making that is more fair, legitimate, and sustainable. The Convention is a regional approach to the global principles endorsed by 178 governments in the Rio Declaration and Principle 10. Now, as it enters into force, the Convention has shifted the debate from *whether* we should guarantee these rights of access to information, public participation, and justice in environmental decision-making to *how* we should make these rights available to all, and has suggested a way for us to implement these rights.

The implementation of Principle 10 and the Aarhus Convention requires national policies, legislation, institutions, and practices for public access to information about the state of the environment; mechanisms for participation such as notification and comment on proposed projects; and guarantees and infrastructure for redress and remedy at the national level. Implementation of these principles requires that governments are able to identify gaps and measure progress in the practice of these commitments. We urge governments around the world, both inside and outside the framework of the Aarhus Convention, to develop mechanisms that will allow them to measure their own success in implementing these access rights as outlined in the Aarhus Convention and in Principle 10. The Access Initiative, led by a global team of NGOs, is developing one such mechanism that can allow governments to measure their successes and areas for improvement. The Initiative has developed an indicator framework, currently being pilot-tested in nine countries, which benchmarks progress on these commitments and evaluates government performance at the national level.

We congratulate those governments that have signed the Aarhus Convention and are beginning the process of implementing these principles. We urge all governments, those within as well as those outside the Aarhus Convention, to implement these vital principles and to develop tools to measure their successes in working towards more fair, legitimate, and sustainable environmental decision-making.”

The Access Initiative (TAI) is a global coalition of public interest groups collaborating to promote national-level implementation of commitments to access to information, participation, and justice in environmental decision-making. It is led by a Core Team of four organizations: World Resources Institute (USA), Thailand Environment Institute (Thailand), Environmental Management and Law Association (Hungary), and Corporación Participa (Chile).

Environmental Management and Law Association

“We take this opportunity to offer congratulations on the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention. Aarhus has been a call for, an impetus, and a guide for building public participation in our region and for providing an example to the world. We are pleased to have been a part of this monumentally important process and we look forward to the future as Aarhus generates an even more strongly felt impact.”

Sandor Fulop and Gyula Bandi,
Environmental Management and Law Association, Hungary

INTERACTIVE HEALTH ECOLOGY ACCESS LINKS (IHEAL)

“Members of IHEAL -- the environment and health information and communication technologies network created in support of implementation of the Aarhus Convention - join in congratulating the UN ECE Secretariat on their tremendous achievement.

We look forward to working with you so that this innovative legislation realizes the vision of those who worked so hard to bring it into effect -- for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

UNEP/GRID-Arendal

“.. the most unconventional convention ...”

Nickolai Denisov
Programme Manager, Europe and the NIS
UNEP/GRID-Arendal, Norway