

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE ROME ANNIVERSARY EVENT TO CELEBRATE 20 YEARS OF THE AARHUS CONVENTION

15-16 May 2018, Rome

The Rome Anniversary Event was held in Rome on 15-16 May 2018. The event was organized by Italy in cooperation with the secretariat of the UNECE Aarhus Convention and the European Environmental Bureau. The meeting provided a forum where the main achievements and lessons learned in the last 20 years as well as future challenges and objectives of the Convention's implementation were discussed among some key past and present players, including representatives of governmental authorities, academic institutions, NGOs and other stakeholders. The event offered an opportunity to look back at the time when the Aarhus Convention was negotiated, to reflect on the main challenges and to debate the present critical issues and the way forward. The meeting was unique in its format, as it allowed Parties, NGOs and other stakeholders to share their views in an open and rather informal way. It helped to increase awareness of the critical issues related to the implementation of the Aarhus Convention. Some 80 delegates took part in the meeting. The event was chaired by Mr. Francesco La Camera, Director General, Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea of Italy, who was also a key negotiator of the Convention and Chair of the 2nd Meeting of the Signatories. The event comprised three thematic panel discussions on: the evolution of the Aarhus Convention and setting a vision for the future; challenges ahead: critical issues and proposals; and snapshot of experiences from the region. It involved 17 panellists and three moderators.

Key messages derived from the discussions

- The fathers and mothers of the Convention were visionaries. This is evidenced by its Article 1, which refers to a fundamental right of every person to live in a healthy and sustainable environment, including for future generations. It explicitly makes this Convention an instrument of both international environmental law and an instrument of international human rights law.
- This Article is often forgotten, as the attention is focused on the three pillars of the Convention. We still have a long way to go to reach this objective.
- The most challenging aspects from NGOs' point of view during the negotiations were: establishing credible NGO participation; maintaining ambition despite lowest common denominator decision-making process. Among today's challenges are: promoting implementation and compliance, bringing new Parties onboard and addressing shortcomings in the Convention through legally binding measures.
- The Aarhus Compliance Committee is the jewel of the Aarhus Convention. The Committee must be strengthened and its integrity and independence at times of policy pressure should be preserved.
- The Convention's application crosses disciplinary boundaries. It is difficult to find a decision-making that would not impact the environment. Climate change, biodiversity, chemicals, financing and recently, SDGs, the list is certainly non-exhaustive. It gives

opportunity to other international forums and their different communities to use and benefit from the Convention.

- Parties are ambassadors of the Convention and Aarhus focal points play a central role here. They are critical for national implementation. Their task becomes even more complex when it comes to promoting the Convention's principles in international negotiations. They need to be supported by expertise and financially, and the most important – they require a strong political support.
- NGOs participation under the umbrella of the European ECO Forum makes it possible to unite their forces and expertise. It is a coordination platform with its reach-out to both East and West. Contributions of this NGO network proved to be very effective in the Convention's process.
- Potential of the Aarhus Convention to address environmental security threats is significant. This is evidenced by a strong engagement of OSCE in its implementation.
- The Aarhus Centres Network is a unique feature. They are operational arms of the Convention on the ground. They provide platforms to engage citizens, governments and the private sector in a non-confrontational dialogue on environmental challenges. Since 2002, the OSCE has been supporting the establishment, operation and networking of Aarhus Centres. Currently there is a network of 60 Aarhus Centres that are operating in 14 countries.

What results did the Aarhus brought?

- Snapshots from the region showcased success stories in different countries. Despite the remaining challenges, the Convention brought more transparency, increased participatory approaches and the free access to information became a standard practice; there is a growing use of administrative and court procedures by citizens and NGOs.
- The Convention was designed as a global instrument. It gives opportunity to countries from other regions to join it. It also inspired many processes. The best gift that could be made to Aarhus for its 20th birthday in this regard - the Escazu Agreement. This remarkable achievement gave a stimulus to creating a new Aarhus-Escazu community of commitment, which forms jointly a critical mass to promote effective public participation in international negotiations.

To conclude

- The best rights are of no help, if they are not used. The Convention is an invitation to public to make use of their rights. And it is a firm request to Governments to ensure safe exercising of these rights.
- Today we must not only question the effectiveness of the Convention, which has produced real results, but also how much do these positive results contribute to the possibility for «every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being», the famous Article 1 designed by fathers and mothers of the Convention.
