



Women in Europe for a Common Future | WECF

Promoting informed environmental choices of consumers to fill information gaps

A focus on consumer products for pregnant women, babies and children

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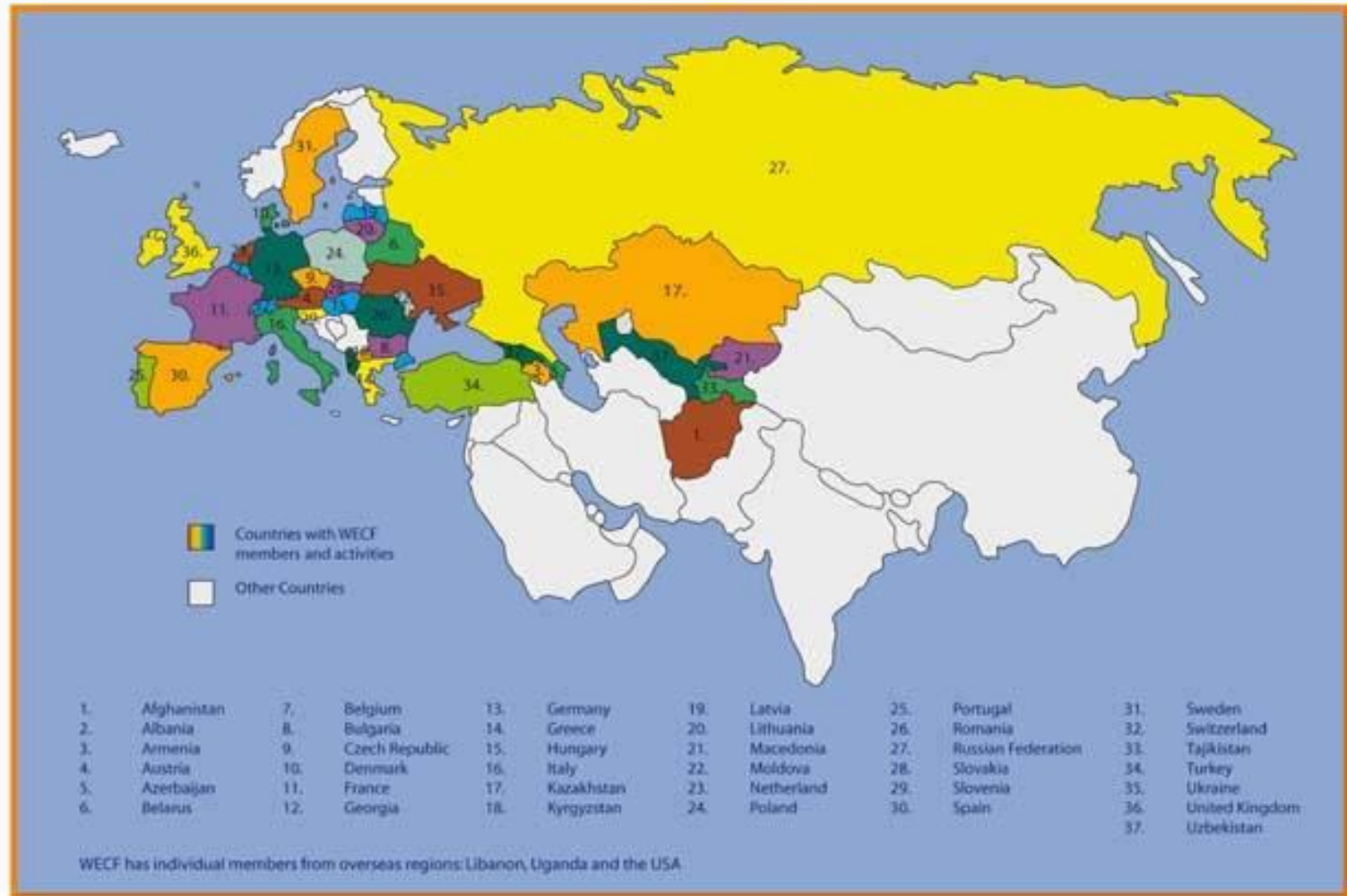
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Who are we?

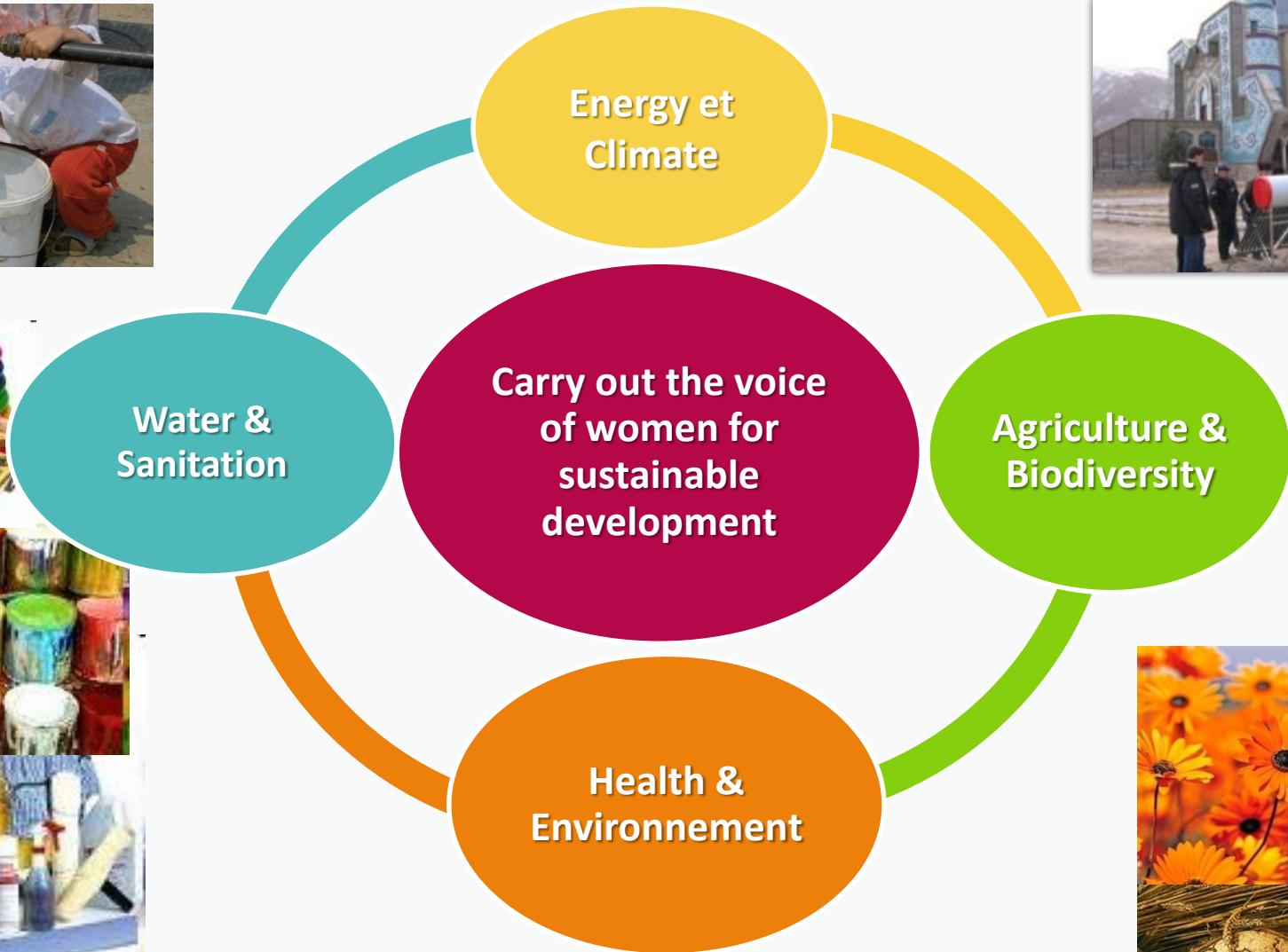


A network of 140 environmental organizations created by women

... present in 40 countries...



... active in 4 areas



Aarhus Convention: a tool for citizens

Aim = contribute to the right of every person of present and future generations to **live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being**

Art 3-4-5:

- Public authorities officials **possess and update environmental information which is relevant to their functions...**
-authorities **assist and provide guidance to the public in seeking access to information...**
- ... **promote environmental education and environmental awareness among the public...**
- **in response to a request** for environmental information, **make such information available** to the public

Level of implementation of Aarhus convention :

- “**some reporting countries indicated a need for more information about environmental legislation, both for authorities and civil society**” (for example, Denmark), *Denmark is among the most active EU Member State on health and environment issues, so what about others?*
- “**financial constraints and a lack of trained staff and relevant equipment** as significant obstacles to the collection and dissemination of environmental information” *environment as collateral damage of economic crisis*
- “Belarus especially mentioned that **national legislative provisions on trade secrets contradict article 4, paragraph 4 (d), of the Convention**”. *Industrial data vs environment*
- “**Numerous effective electronic tools** are being further developed in this area, e.g., electronic databases, publicly accessible governmental electronic services, websites and information portals, all routinely updated and improved”. *Positive, but most are designed for professional users. They shall be more user-friendly and promoted so that people use them.*
- « **Voluntary eco-labelling systems**, implementation of voluntary environmental management systems » *Positive, but in an absence of criteria to assess their contents, this may make information even more confused.*

Low public awareness: a reality

1) Does the public know about its right to information?

Ex: does the public know about existence of Aarhus convention? Is info on consumers/citizens rights conveyed by **popular media**?

Ex: *EU REACH regulation 1997/2006 – a right to know on chemicals of concern in products of article 33 is generally **ignored, and consequently not used.***

Ex: *RAPEX EU website **in English only***

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/dyna/rapex/create_rapex.cfm?rx_id=496

2) Is environmental information available?

3) When provided, is information understandable by the general public? Is it translated into common language so that it can be communicated by the media?

4) Lots of internet tools are for professional rather than other users.

Some obstacles to implementation

Existence of information:

- data gaps on chemicals contained in products and used for manufacturing,
- a shortage of data in certain areas, or else a profusion of data or data generators. the information given to the public about impact studies and installations classified for environmental purposes (ICPE) differs from one area to another (*ex: recent industrial incident in Lubrizol factory, France*)

Nature of information:

- environmental information may be complex and difficult to convey to the public,

Confidentiality:

- confidentiality of commercial and industrial information,
- “culture” of resistance to transparency,
- overly wide interpretation of confidentiality *ex the nuclear industry*

Format and cost of information:

- absence of centralized contacts dedicated to environment
- inadequate format of existing information
- difficulties for the general public in obtaining the information and **cost** of communication,
- Ex: the need to improve access to standards produced by AFNOR *most of standards are not free*

Example of existing information

- List of ingredients on cosmetics, detergents and food products – an exception.
- CLP classification labeling:



- Ecolabels:



- Indication of Volatile Organic Compounds emissions of decoration products (France)
- Information on carbon footprint:



Illustration: concerns of parents-to-be on chemicals in products

- **Precise questions**

Ex: which paint/decoration product shall I choose for a newborn bedroom? What are the ingredients of the mattress I just bought for my baby? Etc.

- Need for quick reaction
- Want **solutions**
- Role of NGOs as intermediate in a context of loss of confidence in public authorities (following health, environment scandals) : often the information cannot be found.

WECF tools for informing the public

- Publications
- Workshops
- Conferences
- Public testings
- Webplatform



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Raise awareness on the existence of a right to information**
- Fill existing gap resulting in absence of data
- **Adapt contents and tools to the general public:**
 - Centralize and ease the way to find the information for citizens: phone number at national level / centralized webplatform / general public campaign on Aarhus campaign
 - National and reactive Q&A platforms for consumers
- Implement the **precautionary principle** for emerging risks
- **Improve and harmonize** labelling of products
- Harmonize legislations choosing the most protective one
- **Improve monitoring of international legal instruments:**
 - Produce figures and indicators, surveys to measure the degree of use of the Aarhus convention by citizens
 - Compile and share best practices on Aarhus convention implementation

Conclusion:

An informed public opinion means:

- a **better understanding**,
- **more confidence in existing legislation**,
- more **involvement in environmental public debate**

**WILL BENEFIT THE WHOLE SOCIETY
& MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO AVOID NEW
HEALTH/ENVIRONMENT SCANDALS**

THANK YOU!

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