



Statement delivered by Ms. Marta Szigeti Bonifert, executive director of the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), at the Joint High-Level Segment under the fifth Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters and the second Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, Maastricht, July 2, 2014

Co-chairs, Ministers, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the City of Maastricht for hosting this meeting to promote democratic values, transparency and human rights in the field of the environment. It is an honour for me to participate on the panel of the Joint High-Level Segment of the fifth Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and the second Meeting of the Parties to the PRTR Protocol on behalf of the REC and to touch upon the increasingly important topic of how social media can benefit the environment.

Since its establishment in 1990, the REC has contributed to sustainable development, environmental protection and social and economic cohesion, stability and wellbeing by promoting cooperation among key environmental stakeholders including governments, non-governmental organisations, the business sector and academia. As an international organisation, the REC's work programmes reflect and reinforce the efforts of the signatories to the REC Charter, which include 31 governments and the European Commission, to build environmental democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

The Aarhus Convention is the basis for improved environmental governance in the UNECE region and globally. Good environmental governance is essential for sustainable development, and effective public participation at each stage of the decision-making process ensures a broad consensus among stakeholders and citizens that helps to prevent future conflicts.

Social media offer many exciting possibilities for stakeholder communication and collaboration with the public. Initially business and marketing tools, social media are now increasingly being used by politicians and the general public. They have created new opportunities for sharing information, offering new insights and solutions. Technological innovations are allowing people to create and disseminate content in new and powerful ways. They have made possible multi-way communication among stakeholders, leading to genuine participation.



Sustainable development values and principles are spread – Those with no previous knowledge of sustainable development issues may become aware of the commitment of friends and peers to build a more sustainable future in their personal and professional lives.

Issues and solutions go viral – In the fast-paced world of social media, information spreads at the click of a button. Entertainment-based information is passed on rapidly, whether or not it is based on solid science or sound policy. Presentation and substance are given equal weight.

Small-scale issues and local concerns gain global audiences – Individuals with global networks of “friends” become international amplifiers of local sustainability issues.

Specialised knowledge is made generally accessible – Advances in research and development are shared by experts among vast networks of friends, many of whom are not specialists. People are empowered to comment more confidently on areas outside their expertise.

Disciplinary gaps are more easily bridged – While professional networking in the fields of business and politics has long existed within specific disciplinary communities and in specific locations, increasing access to online networking tools in recent decades has led to a massive growth in global cross-disciplinary conversations that overcome sectoral barriers.

However, social media pose their own risks – New technologies and new communication channels can provide apparently limitless information. Nevertheless, social media cannot entirely replace personal interactions. In a global population of 7 billion, some groups of society will remain untouched and face-to-face contacts are still essential in order to reach a common understanding. Meanwhile, the validity of information shared via social media should be regarded with caution.

Social media should be used according to the level of public participation desired: to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower.

As an active contributor since the adoption of the Aarhus Convention in Central and Eastern Europe, the REC has accumulated a wealth of experience and expertise to share with the Aarhus community. The REC makes use of social media technologies and tools in the firm belief that by sharing information in innovative ways it can greatly enhance people’s opportunities to gain a better understanding of environmental issues and solutions.



Examples of the REC's approach include the CIVITAS Network that promotes sustainable urban transport in Europe; European Mobility Week; and Nuclear Transparency Watch, which aims to increase the contribution of civil society in the governance of nuclear activities. The REC also promotes participatory governance through partnerships such as the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC), which it is chairing in 2014, and through a wide range of projects implemented by its 12 topic areas.

One of the REC's key areas of work is education for sustainable development. Its flagship educational programmes Green Pack and Green Pack Junior are helping to convey the Aarhus principles and values to future generations, whose daily lives will inevitably be strongly impacted by social media. Since 2001, approximately 38,000 teachers have been trained to use the Green Pack materials, and over 4 million students have been reached in 18 countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

In conclusion, transparent and participatory mechanisms are essential for good environmental governance and sustainable development, in the same way that a proper legal and financial framework is fundamental for effective environmental policy. In the last 25 years, the REC has devoted its knowledge and expertise to promoting the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, and it remains committed to these same values in the future.

Thank you for your attention.