



*The below statement on public participation in international forums has been delivered by the Center for International Environmental Law **on behalf of the European ECO Forum** at the 24th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties of the Aarhus Convention on July 3rd, 2020.*

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of ECO Forum, we welcome the work done by the Secretariat over the past year on matters related to PPIF and the suggestions contained in the note of the chair of the thematic session.

Before discussing specific proposals regarding future work under this agenda item, we would like to briefly place this work in the current global context.

Civil society is facing a global push back in international forums with an increasing number of States seeking to restrict rather than improve the participation of the public in international governance – particularly on matters related to the environment.

This trend materializes in different forms:

- Some UN member states increasingly seek to shrink the civil society space in UN Forums as they do domestically.
- Others are promoting modalities reinforcing the role of business actors in international forums in a manner that actually undermines public participation as mandated under the Aarhus Convention.

The Coronavirus and the resulting shift to web-based meeting has only exacerbated this trend, with many meetings taking place with no adequate participation of the public despite the importance of the decisions made. Without an urgent reversal of this trend we risk undermining decades of efforts to promote public participation in international forums.

In this context, we call upon the Parties to work much more proactively to uphold their obligations under article 3.7 in all relevant forums.

We also call upon Parties and the Secretariat to increase the ambition of the work undergoing under PPIF during the next session, seeking to address cross cutting

dimensions of PPIF and other urgent issues through a wider range of engagement – complementing the thematic sessions with other modalities of work such as expert workshops.

In October, we believe that PPIF should receive more attention than initially envisioned in order to reflect this urgent trend.

My colleague Lisa Kadel will now highlight key elements included in the ECO Forum submission regarding the key areas of concern for the upcoming October session and priorities for the work beyond.

Honourable delegates,

Esteemed Chair,

as mentioned already, it is imperative that the Aarhus parties discuss ways to uphold their obligations under the Convention in times of Covid-19, especially in relation to public participation in international forums. Online engagement is widely used as a replacement for physical meetings, but it presents substantial challenges both relating to inequities in access and to the quality of participation that is possible. We strongly urge the Parties to address these challenges at the October session on public participation in international forums and would encourage the Secretariat to play a proactive role in supporting other UN forums in understanding how to uphold adequately public participation in these special circumstances.

Looking to the October session, we would also like to reiterate our concern about the lack of access to information and public participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization and the ongoing need for engagement of the Aarhus Parties on this issue - especially in the context of airlines being bailed out with public money in many UNECE countries in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Further decisions made by this forum will have a significant impact on the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Other ECO Forum colleagues speaking after me will highlight the urgency for the thematic session to discuss two additional pressing issues this October.

Beyond October, for the next intersessional period, we call upon the parties to unpack the significance of paragraph 15 of the Almaty Guidelines, which emphasizes the need to proactively counter inequity in participation and to facilitate participation by marginalized groups who may lack resources. This provision is a ray of hope for civil society representatives who are not, in fact, empowered to participate meaningfully in international forums. However, there is a long way ahead to reach full implementation of this principle. By mandating specific work on this issue during the intersessional period, such as a thematic workshop and the identification of relevant good practices, Aarhus Parties would contribute to promoting environmental democracy both within and beyond the UNECE region. Such work would reflect the consideration of these issues in the context of the upcoming meeting of the Public Participation Task Force.

Additionally, we would like to highlight a continued need for capacity building, especially for state delegates representing Aarhus Parties to relevant international forums, and a need for clarification of the duties of host countries. We welcome the proposals made by the chair in this regard and strongly encourage further work on these important issues.

Beyond these general priorities, we would like to reiterate our call for PPIF related work to focus on the issue of carbon-trading and other market-based mechanisms. Our experience shows that effective public participation in the design of these mechanisms and in the implementation of projects, are essential to prevent and rectify harm to the rights of local communities and Indigenous Peoples.

And finally, we would like to draw the Parties attention to recent developments regarding the processes relating to the Sustainable Development Goals. We are very concerned about the so-called “no-objection” procedure in the High Level Political Forum which effectively allows any UN member state to veto NGO participation. We call upon the Parties to ensure that such exclusion does not take place the Almaty Guidelines are fully implemented.

Thank you for your attention.