

Statement by ECO Forum: Francesca Carlsson, EEB

The ECO Forum would like to highlight a number of issues and themes related to the Promotion of the principles of the Aarhus Convention in international forums and the issue I would like to raise relates to PPIF in the context of COVID and post-COVID implications.

We have been living in these pandemic times for over a year and at the 24th Working Group of the Parties ten months ago we highlighted some of the concerns and trends that civil society had regarding online forms of engagement in international fora, for instance in the UNEA processes, SAICM or the High Level Political Forum. One year on, we are especially concerned that we are creating a “new normal” that will continue to exist after the pandemic is over.

In last year’s WGP meeting, as well as in previous meetings, we stressed how 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. Indeed, this perception predates the pandemic and therefore is independent of it, but last year we raised our concern, and we would like to reiterate it today, that the pandemic and online meeting formats may be used as an opportunity to side-line civil society from meaningful engagement in some international processes in the future.

As we heard from our colleague Antje Lorch this morning, online engagement is used as a replacement for physical meetings, which may pose substantial challenges both relating to inequities and inequalities in access to the internet and to the quality of participation that is possible.

After the pandemic, we are likely going to continue with hybrid meetings to allow for a potentially greater number of people to participate. Of course, widening the opportunity for participation is obviously welcome. However, with hybrid meetings, we risk situations in which government representatives will meet and take decisions in physical meetings, whereas civil society participation will be limited to the virtual meetings, with reduced chances of influencing decision-making. Generally, we are likely to see that delegates with fewer means to participate in person will be at a disadvantage in influencing decision-making, while they may formally be part of the same processes.

We are concerned that the rigidity of online meetings and the overall reduced interaction during meetings will remain and be mostly felt by civil society. We know that a lot of the discussions and therefore opportunities to influence positions occur in the corridors or in smaller meetings where remote participation is simply not an adequate substitute to physically being present. We risk normalising and formalising a two-tier approach to participation that will be less transparent and participatory.

We therefore urge Parties to be very mindful of the specific difficulties and barriers civil society is facing during these pandemic times, and this should be monitored at the MOP and beyond. Crucially, Aarhus Parties must uphold their obligations under Article 3(7) of the Convention to ensure that these barriers do not become entrenched in a new participation model that will effectively diminish the role and influence that civil society can have in international forums.

