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Access to Information, Public Participation
in Decision-making and Access to Justice
in Environmental Matters

Working Group of the Parties

Twenty-fifth meeting

Geneva, 3 May and 7 and 8 June 2021

Item 12 of the provisional agenda

**Implementation of the work programme for 2018–2021,
including financial matters**

Report on the implementation of the work programme for 2018–2021*

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present report was prepared pursuant to the decision of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters at its sixth session (Budva, Montenegro, 11–14 September 2017) (see ECE/MP.PP/2017/2/Add.1, decision VI/5, annex I, item X). It provides an overview of the implementation of the work programme for the Convention for 2018–2021 for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.^a

^a For the report on the period covering 1 January 2018–1 April 2019 and 1 April 2019–1 April 2020, see, respectively, ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2019/5 and ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2020/4.

* This document was scheduled for publication after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



Introduction

1. The present report provides an overview of the implementation of the work programme for the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) for 2018–2021 (ECE/MP.PP/2017/2/Add.1, decision VI/5, annex I) for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, focusing on operational and organizational aspects. Owing to the cross-cutting nature of the Convention, implementation of different work programme areas contributed to furthering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals across the whole 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 16. An overview of contributions and expenditures in relation to the implementation of the work programme is provided in document ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2021/7. Only some of the activities related to access to information, capacity-building and awareness-raising regarding the Convention's Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers are included in the present document. A comprehensive report on the implementation of the work programme of the Protocol for 2018–2021 (ECE/MP.PRTR/WG.1/2020/5) was submitted to the eighth meeting of the Protocol's Working Group of the Parties (Geneva, 16–18 December 2020).

2. In implementing the work programme, the secretariat made strenuous efforts to avoid duplication of work and the inefficient use of resources by pursuing synergies with activities under other United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) multilateral environmental agreements, United Nations agencies and other partners. Furthermore, in the light of restrictions associated with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the secretariat adjusted to new methods of work by extending organization of meetings in online and hybrid formats and using more electronic tools (for example, email consultations, conferencing by means of web-based, video or telephone technology, online databases and the Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy). It should be noted that meetings in an online or a hybrid format allow participants to avoid spending time and resources on travel, provide an opportunity for wider participation, and could also be considered more resource efficient in general. However, the organization of such meetings required providing additional training for the staff to manage different information technology infrastructure and spending more time on the preparatory phase of activities to ensure proper consultations with delegations, the chairs of the respective subsidiary bodies and partner organizations, as well as liaising with conference services on numerous practical arrangements. Thus, arranging and servicing complex meetings in a hybrid or online format requires a high level of support by substantive and technical staff. In addition, there are a number of challenges associated with organizing such meetings. First, unpredictability of the quality of the Internet connection and availability of the required equipment on the participants' side, and other technical issues may have an impact on substantive discussions and procedures. Furthermore, the limited number of meeting rooms at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, that are equipped for servicing online or hybrid meetings posed additional challenge in organizing those meetings. In the future, it would be advisable to make decisions on holding such meetings based on the meetings' purpose. For example, meetings of small expert groups or the Bureau are less challenging to organize in such formats than complex meetings requiring interpretation, negotiations and decision-making. For the latter, wider online participation can be complementary to in-person meetings. Moreover, the required quality of information technology infrastructure and, when needed, the availability of interpretation for remote participation, are key preconditions for organizing meetings in a hybrid or online format.

I. Substantive issues

A. Access to information, including electronic information tools, the Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy and PRTR.net

3. During the reporting period (i.e. 1 April 2020–31 March 2021), activities primarily focused on promoting the exchange of experience to improve public access to environmental information, as required by articles 4 and 5 and other relevant provisions of the Aarhus Convention, including through electronic information tools. Those activities contributed to

the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and in particular target 16.10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms), together with Goal 3 (health), Goal 6 (water), Goal 9 (resilient infrastructure), Goal 11 (resilient and sustainable cities), Goal 12 (sustainable consumption and production), Goal 13 (climate action) and Goal 15 (life on land), as well as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

4. During the seventh meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information (online, 16 and 17 November 2020),¹ the Task Force promoted the exchange of information, case studies and good practices, and discussed recent and upcoming developments to promote transparency and digital transformation to support a green and circular economy, biosafety and community resilience. In particular, the discussion focused on: (a) access to environment-related product information; (b) access to information with respect to genetically modified organisms (GMOs); and (c) the update of the Recommendations on electronic information tools (AC/TF.AI-7/Inf.3 and Add.1). The Task Force took stock of developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the application of restrictions in disclosure of environmental information in accordance with Convention activities and monitoring progress towards environment-related Sustainable Development Goals, in particular target 16.10 thereof.

5. To continue the work on updating the Recommendations pursuant to decision VI/1 of the Meeting of the Parties (ECE/MP.PP/2017/2/Add.1, decision VI/1, operative para. 13 (b) (i)), the next round of the consultation process among Parties, signatories, other interested States and stakeholders was launched in the lead-up to the seventh meeting of the Task Force with the aim of collecting drafting proposals and case studies. Taking into account the outcomes of the consultation and comments received at the meeting, the draft of the updated Recommendations was prepared and made available for further comments, with a view to preparing the next revised draft for the consideration of the upcoming meeting of the Working Group of the Parties (see ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2021/13 and ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2021/13/Add.1).

6. The secretariat also continued to manage the Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy² and the PRTR.net³ global portal. This included upgrading the online tools, both in terms of security, functionality and content. The two portals were used to facilitate the collection, dissemination and exchange of information related to national implementation of the Convention and relevant global and regional developments regarding implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. They also provided information regarding pollutant release and transfer registers. Parties were encouraged to continue uploading relevant news articles and resources and to provide the weblink to their national node.

7. The secretariat also undertook a number of substantial tasks associated with activities for digital transformation at ECE that included the migration of the ECE website to the new content management system, the migration of its internal files to another system, the introduction of the new online registration system, and the switch of operations to cloud applications. Work is ongoing to optimize the use of these tools.

8. The secretariat also continued to maintain and populate a jurisprudence database accessible through the Convention's updated web page⁴ and the interface of the Aarhus Clearinghouse, which enhances its search capabilities. The database promotes the exchange of jurisprudence concerning the Convention and facilitates work on access to justice. It includes decisions issued by courts of law or other bodies that make reference to the Convention or its principles, as well as summaries (some in English, others in Russian) and decisions in the original language and in English, when available. The maintenance of the database is an ongoing activity.

¹ See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/seventh-meeting-task-force-access-information-under-aarhus-convention>.

² See <http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org/>.

³ See <https://prtr.unece.org/>.

⁴ See <https://unece.org/env/pp/tfaj-case-law-related-convention>.

9. The secretariat continued to maintain and populate a collection of case studies on electronic information tools, which it posted on a dedicated web page and updated regularly.⁵ A call for case studies remains ongoing, with a view to the continued population of the collection and sharing of good practices.

10. The secretariat also launched the upgraded online reporting tools and databases of national implementation reports for the Aarhus Convention⁶ and its Protocol,⁷ and integration of the Aarhus Good Practice online database⁸ into the Aarhus Clearinghouse in order to align those websites with the latest information technology security standards.

11. During the reporting period, the secretariat contributed to the work of other international forums or expert meetings organized by ECE subprogrammes and partner organizations dealing with access to environmental information and electronic information tools. It further provided a number of inputs related to: the World Summit on the Information Society Forum 2021 (online, 17–21 May 2021); the development of a shared environmental information system, digital transformation and circular economy across the region; digitalization of national environmental information systems; and the integration of environmental information into e-government and open data frameworks.

B. Public participation in decision-making

12. During the reporting period, activities focused on promoting effective public participation in decision-making, as required by articles 6, 7 and 8 and other relevant provisions of the Aarhus Convention. Those activities contributed to furthering Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and in particular target 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels) and target 16.10 (public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms) of the Sustainable Development Goals, together with Goal 3 (health) and Goal 12 (sustainable consumption and production).

13. At its ninth meeting, the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making (online, 1 and 2 March 2021)⁹ provided a platform for discussing the participation of vulnerable and marginalized groups in decision-making that also allowed for exchange of practices that facilitate more effective public participation without entailing additional significant resources on the part of public authorities. The thematic focus of the meeting was on: decision-making in the extractive industries sector, on energy and climate; and emerging technologies, with a focus on geoengineering. The Task Force identified good practices, challenges and trends in these areas.

14. A call for case studies on public participation in environmental decision-making was ongoing, with a view to the continued population of the Aarhus Clearinghouse Good Practice online database and sharing experience, good practices and lessons learned in the next intersessional period.

15. During the reporting period, the secretariat contributed to the work of other international forums or expert meetings organized by ECE programmes and partner organizations dealing with public participation in decision-making. In particular, it provided input to the drafting of a COVID-19 Recovery Action Plan for Informal Settlements in the ECE Region (ECE/HBP/WP.7/2021/7) and a people-first public-private partnerships impact assessment tool.

⁵ See <https://unece.org/env/pp/eit-case-studies>.

⁶ See <https://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org/national-reports/reports>.

⁷ See <https://prtr.unece.org/national-reports/reports>.

⁸ See https://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org/resources-keyword?individual=1&field_keywords_target_id=good%20practice.

⁹ See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/ninth-meeting-task-force-public-participation-decision-making>.

C. Access to justice

16. During the reporting period, numerous activities focused on promoting effective access to justice, thereby contributing to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), in particular target 16.3 (rule of law at the national and international levels and equal access to justice for all) and target 16.10 (public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms) of the Sustainable Development Goals.

17. Following the outcomes of the eleventh meeting of the Task Force on Access to Justice (Geneva, 27 and 28 February 2018),¹⁰ a survey on access to justice in information cases was launched. The draft report was then prepared by the Chair of the Task Force summarizing the responses received to the survey. The report provided a basis for discussion at the twelfth meeting of the Task Force (Geneva, 28 February and 1 March 2019).¹¹ The draft report was further revised by the Chair in the light of the comments made at and after the meeting and made available for comments by Parties and stakeholders by 1 April 2020.

18. A thematic session on access to justice was held during the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties (Geneva, 28 October 2020).¹² Following up on the outcomes of this thematic session, the Task Force on Access to Justice at its thirteenth meeting¹³ (online, 15 and 16 February 2021) provided a platform for exchanging information, experiences and good practices with regard to key recent developments in the implementation of the access to justice pillar of the Convention and possible measures to remove barriers hampering its implementation. The thematic session of the meeting focused on promoting public interest litigation in environmental matters. The Task Force identified good practices, barriers, challenges, innovative approaches, priority actions and needs in this area. In addition, it continued the discussion on measures to promote effective access to justice in information cases and cases relating to air quality. The Task Force also took stock of recent and upcoming developments related to the implementation of the third pillar of the Convention on a general level.

19. The draft report on access to justice in information cases prepared by the Chair of the Task Force was further updated in the light of the comments received during the next round of consultation. The updated report was discussed at the thirteenth meeting of the Task Force, finalized shortly afterwards and made available online.¹⁴

20. During the reporting period, the secretariat contributed to the work of other international forums or expert meetings organized by partner organizations dealing with access to justice, and continued to populate the Aarhus Clearinghouse with relevant resources. The secretariat also promoted cooperation within the network of the judiciary, judicial training institutions and other review bodies in the pan-European region under the auspices of the Task Force. A call for case summaries related to the Convention remains ongoing, with a view to the continued population of the jurisprudence database and continued sharing of experiences in the next intersessional period.

D. Genetically modified organisms

21. Bilateral collaboration on genetically modified organisms is ongoing between the secretariats of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity. The secretariat of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

¹⁰ See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/eleventh-meeting-task-force-access-justice-under-aarhus-convention>

¹¹ See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/twelfth-meeting-task-force-access-justice-under-aarhus-convention>

¹² See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/twenty-fourth-meeting-working-group-parties-aarhus-convention-hybrid> (AJ session).

¹³ See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/thirteenth-meeting-task-force-access-justice-under-aarhus-convention>.

¹⁴ See <https://unece.org/environment/documents/2021/03/aarhus-tfaj-study-access-justice-information-cases>.

provided substantive input to the session on GMOs at the seventh meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information and is actively involved in the organization of the two thematic sessions at the upcoming twenty-fifth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties¹⁵ focusing on this matter. The sessions aim to bringing together representatives of Governments, academia, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other experts engaged in the implementation of both instruments from numerous countries to share relevant experiences and expertise and build capacities in this area. The events are thus also expected to help Governments to further the attainment of a number of Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 2 (zero hunger), Goal 15 (life on land) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

22. To advance access to information with respect to GMOs, the Task Force on Access to Information underscored the importance of implementing the respective provisions of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in synergy. This approach would involve, among other things, improving the collection of data and information and their integration into the nationwide digital environmental information system and reporting on the state of the environment. The use of electronic information tools could facilitate reporting on, and support effective public access to, such data and information. The involvement of Aarhus Centres, educational institutions, libraries and the media in raising awareness of these matters and providing assistance to the public on how to obtain access to information was considered instrumental. Further activities in this area could also support realization of the forthcoming Implementation Plan for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety that was expected to be adopted by the Tenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (Kunming, China, 11–24 October 2021).

23. Both secretariats continuously promoted the use of e-learning modules,¹⁶ tools and checklists developed jointly under the Aarhus Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity. A call for submitting useful resources to the Biosafety Clearing House and the Aarhus Clearinghouse remains ongoing, with a view to continued sharing of experience, good practices and lessons learned in the next intersessional period.

24. During the reporting period, Albania accepted the amendment to the Aarhus Convention on public participation in decisions on the deliberate release into the environment and placing on the market of genetically modified organisms (GMO amendment). One more Party from among the following list must ratify the GMO amendment for it to enter into force: Armenia; Azerbaijan; Belarus; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; North Macedonia; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; and Ukraine. The Parties whose ratification of the GMO amendment would count towards its entry into force had been repeatedly called upon during the previous intersessional period to take specific steps towards ratification and to provide the secretariat with a written explanation of the status of ratification. At its sixth session (Budva, Montenegro, 11–14 September 2017), the Meeting of the Parties had requested the Working Group of the Parties to continue monitoring closely progress towards the entry into force of the GMO amendment (see ECE/MP.PP/2017/2, para. 38).

II. Procedures and mechanisms

A. Compliance mechanism

25. During the reporting period, the Compliance Committee held three regular meetings, namely, its sixty-seventh, sixty-eighth and sixty-ninth meetings, and in addition fourteen virtual meetings. Of those, two regular meetings (Geneva (online), 6–10 July and 23–27 November) and nine virtual meetings were held in 2019 and one regular meeting (Geneva (online), 25–29 January 2021) and five virtual meetings were held in 2020. Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, six new communications were forwarded to the Committee for

¹⁵ See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/aarhus-convention-wgp-25>.

¹⁶ See <https://scbd.unssc.org/>.

consideration as to their preliminary admissibility.¹⁷ The Committee determined three of those communications to be admissible on a preliminary basis, two to be inadmissible and one to be partially inadmissible and partially admissible and then closed as the Committee's summary proceedings procedure would apply to the admissible part. No submissions were made to the Committee by Parties during the reporting period and the secretariat did not make any referrals. As at 31 March 2021, the Committee had 48 cases pending, consisting of 47 communications and one submission.

26. In addition to the above-mentioned 48 cases, the Committee was following up on 10 decisions adopted by the Meeting of the Parties at its sixth session on the compliance of individual Parties, namely decisions VI/8a–e and VI/8g–k, concerning, respectively, Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Kazakhstan, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (See ECE/MP.PP/2017/2/Add.1). The Committee was also following up on two requests from the Meeting of the Parties concerning the European Union and Turkmenistan¹⁸ and three findings of non-compliance adopted since the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties.¹⁹ The final progress reports of the Parties concerned on the 10 decisions and two requests of the Meeting of the Parties, as well as the final progress reports on two of the findings of non-compliance adopted since the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties,²⁰ were due on 1 October 2020. The Committee is currently preparing its draft reports to the Meeting of the Parties on the progress made by each Party concerned in each case, taking into account the progress reports and comments from communicants and observers received thereon. Once completed, the draft reports will be sent to the Parties concerned, communicants and observers for their written comments. At its seventy-first meeting (Geneva (online), 14, 17 and 18 June 2021), the Committee will hold video conferences in open session with representatives of the Parties concerned and observers in order to discuss the Committee's draft reports to the Meeting of the Parties. Thereafter, after taking into account the comments received on the draft reports, the Committee will finalize and adopt its reports and submit them to the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties.

27. The translation of the second edition of the *Guide to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee* into French and Russian has been completed and the publication is available on the Convention's website in the three official languages of ECE.²¹

B. Capacity-building activities

28. In addition to capacity-building activities mentioned under other areas of work to build synergies and enhance coordination with partners, the secretariat continuously maintained close cooperation with and provided advisory support to United Nations partner agencies and other international organizations within the Aarhus Convention capacity-building coordination framework.²²

29. The secretariat promoted the Convention and the forthcoming decisions of the Convention's Meeting of the Parties at the annual meeting of the Aarhus Centres, organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (online, 10 and 11 November 2020). The meeting brought together Aarhus Centre representatives, national focal points to the Aarhus Convention, representatives of NGOs, international organizations and the OSCE field operations. The meeting's focus was on: the role of Aarhus Centres in

¹⁷ For details, see the reports of the Compliance Committee, available at www.unece.org/env/pp/ccMeetings.html.

¹⁸ Request ACCC/M/2017/2 (Turkmenistan) (see ECE/MP.PP/2017/2/Add.1, decision VI/8, para. 19) and request ACCC/M/2017/3 (European Union) (see ECE/MP.PP/2017/2, para. 63).

¹⁹ Communications ACCC/C/2014/104 (Netherlands) (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2019/3), ACCC/C/2013/107 (Ireland) (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2019/9) and ACCC/C/2016/141 (Ireland) (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2021/8).

²⁰ Communications ACCC/C/2014/104 (Netherlands) (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2019/3) and ACCC/C/2013/107 (Ireland) (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2019/9).

²¹ Available at <https://unece.org/environment-policy/publications/guide-aarhus-convention-compliance-committee>.

²² Meeting documents and other information on this work area are available at <https://unece.org/env/pp/aarhus-convention-capacity-building>.

ensuring environmental democracy in times of disaster and post-disaster recovery; mainstreaming gender into Aarhus Centre activities; and contributing to promoting and achieving sustainable development. The important and relevant contribution of the Aarhus Centres by organizing workshops, public hearings and round-table discussions on disaster risk reduction was particularly noted. Ensuring sustainable functioning of the Aarhus Centres through, for example, resource mobilization remained crucial.

30. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in cooperation with the secretariat and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), launched an online course covering Sustainable Development Goal 16, the Aarhus Convention and the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement) on the InforMEA e-learning platform in English, French and Spanish.²³

31. The secretariat continuously provided advisory support to Parties and non-Parties upon request. In addition, the secretariat liaised continuously with partner organizations, potential donors and interested stakeholders and handled a number of consultations regarding capacity-building activities.

32. The secretariat, in cooperation with partner organizations, started preparations for the report on capacity-building for the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention. To assess capacity-building needs of countries with economies in transition, a survey had been circulated to the respective countries. To take stock of recent developments with regard to existing and future capacity-building activities under the Convention and to promote efficient use of resources and synergy, the twelfth meeting of the Capacity-building Coordination Framework is scheduled to take place online on 11 May 2021.

33. The secretariat continued supporting the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework,²⁴ which was rolled out in 16 countries in the ECE region.²⁵ The Framework can provide an opportunity for multi-partner capacity-building activities related to the Convention and the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers in those countries, which will require close cooperation between the governance and environmental clusters of the Framework. The current preparatory work covers the period 2021–2025. It will be crucial for the long-term sustainability of activities that Parties provide support to such an approach to capacity-building.

34. The Aarhus Clearinghouse was increasingly being used to disseminate information about funding opportunities, workshops and training events relevant to building capacities regarding the implementation of the Aarhus Convention.

C. Reporting mechanism

35. The Meeting of the Parties had set 1 November 2017 as the later deadline for submission of the national implementation reports for the 2017 reporting cycle. To date, only the Republic of Moldova had failed to submit its national implementation report for the 2017 reporting cycle.

36. The 2021 reporting cycle for the Convention was launched in March 2020. Parties should review their reports prepared for the 2017 reporting cycle and submit the updated version to the secretariat through the online reporting tool²⁶ by 21 April 2021. The majority of Parties have successfully implemented this obligation.

²³ See <https://elearning.informea.org/>.

²⁴ See <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/cooperation-framework>.

²⁵ Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

²⁶ See <https://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org/national-reports/reports>.

III. Promotional activities

A. Awareness-raising regarding and promotion of the Convention and the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers

37. The secretariat, or relevant experts invited by the secretariat to do so, participated in conferences, seminars, workshops and other events in various countries to promote and raise awareness regarding the Convention and its Protocol at the international level. Below is a non-exhaustive account of the events.

38. In 2020, the secretariat provided substantive input on the Convention and its Protocol for the third cycle of the environmental performance review of Romania.²⁷

39. A promotional brochure entitled *Protecting your environment: The power is in your hands – Quick guide to the Aarhus Convention*, addressing the general public interested in the Convention and its provisions, was published in all six official languages of the United Nations — Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish — and widely distributed.²⁸ A Japanese-language translation was prepared by the NGO Aarhus Net Japan and made available online.

40. The secretariat also promoted the Convention and the Protocol through numerous reports and articles prepared under the auspices of ECE and partner organizations. In addition, the secretariat continued to carry out an enhanced outreach exercise, distributing materials about the Convention and the Protocol to national focal points, Aarhus Centres, other United Nations bodies, international organizations, NGOs and academic institutions in the ECE region and beyond.

41. Following a formal expression of interest by Guinea Bissau, the secretariat continued to provide advisory support to the country in its efforts to accede to the Convention.

B. Promotion of the Almaty Guidelines on Promoting the Application of the Principles of the Aarhus Convention in International Forums and other interlinkages with relevant international bodies and processes

42. As to the implementation of the Almaty Guidelines on Promoting the Application of the Principles of the Aarhus Convention in International Forums (ECE/MP.PP/2005/2/Add.5, decision II/4, annex), at the twenty-third meeting of the Working Group of the Parties (Geneva, 26–28 June 2019), a thematic session on promoting the Convention's principles in international forums was held, focusing on the promotion of the principles of the Convention in the policies of international financial institutions and on cross-cutting issues, such as: innovative practices; different modalities for engaging stakeholders; self-organization of stakeholders; hosting an international event; and identification of the public. The Working Group also considered the promotion of the Convention's principles within the context of International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) processes. Participants recognized the need for further transparency and effective public participation in ICAO-related processes. Additional topics included: a relevant update on the processes under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; the policy on stakeholder engagement of the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP; and the high-level political forum on sustainable development and Sustainable Development Goal-related processes.

43. During the reporting period, the secretariat continued to support efforts to promote the Convention and its principles and interlinkages with various international forums, working with other United Nations bodies (in particular, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNEP, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

²⁷ See <https://unece.org/reviewed-countries>.

²⁸ United Nations publication, ECE/MP.PP/9. Available at www.unece.org/index.php?id=35452.

the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals and the UNEP Action Plan for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Sustainable Development of the Coastal Areas of the Mediterranean (UNEP/MAP) Coordinating Unit), other environmental treaty bodies (such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and Coastal Region of the Mediterranean, the Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents, the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context and the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes) and other international organizations (for example, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Court of Human Rights, the European Investment Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OSCE, the Council of Europe, the Group on Earth Observations and the World Bank Group).

44. Within the United Nations Environment Management Group, the secretariat acted as focal point for ECE in the Issue Management Group on Human Rights and the Environment.

45. During the reporting period, the secretariat continued promoting the use of the Convention and the Protocol in the context of the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and cooperation with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

46. The secretariat also contributed to the launch of the online Information Repository of Good Practices and Lessons Learned in Land-Use Planning and Industrial Safety²⁹ by the Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents and the European Investment Bank.

47. Pursuant to the Flagship Initiative on Environmental Governance under the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development 2016–2025, which, among other things, encouraged the Mediterranean countries to accede to the Aarhus Convention, the Mediterranean Programme for International Environmental Law and Negotiation Centre, in cooperation with the secretariats of the Aarhus Convention and of the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean, carried out a survey among Parties and organizations. The survey focused on their experiences in implementing the Convention. The results would be used to develop a document on accession to the Aarhus Convention for the Mediterranean countries.

48. The secretariat also continued supporting the activities lead by the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes related to the promotion of the water-energy-food-ecosystems nexus approach.

49. With regard to chemicals management and wastes, the secretariat promoted the work under the Convention and its interlinkages with other treaties and processes, among other things, at the following events:

(a) The sixth Inter-agency Meeting on Sound Chemicals Management (online, 25 March 2021), organized by the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals to facilitate exchange of experience between agencies and organizations and to consider collaboration in the context of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management intersessional and beyond 2020 processes, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In addition to the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management indicator on pollutant release and transfer registers, the number of countries that have implemented the Aarhus Convention is listed as a possible indicator to be mentioned for the beyond 2020 instrument;

(b) Several online meetings of the Virtual Working Groups (2020/2021) on targets, indicators and milestones and on governance and mechanisms to support

²⁹ See <https://unece.org/information-repository-good-practices-and-lessons-learned-land-use-planning-and-industrial-safety>.

implementation under the intersessional process considering the Strategic Approach and Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste beyond 2020.

50. In response to a call to promote the global recognition of the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the secretariat promoted the principles of the Convention during the forty-sixth session of the Human Rights Council (Geneva, 22 February–24 March 2021). A joint statement of 15 United Nations entities, including on behalf of ECE, on the right to a healthy environment was delivered during the general debate of the forty-sixth session of the Human Rights Council on 9 March 2021.³⁰ The Chair of the Bureau presented the ongoing work on developing a rapid response mechanism to protect environmental defenders under the Convention at a parallel event to the forty-sixth session of the Human Rights Council (online, 9 March 2021).³¹

51. During the reporting period, upon request, the secretariat also provided ongoing advisory support, including by engaging relevant experts, to ECLAC regarding the negotiation of the Escazú Agreement. In this regard, the secretariat provided advisory support, in particular to share experiences and lessons learned regarding the rules of procedure of the Convention's Meeting of the Parties and the compliance mechanism, to the signatory countries of the Escazú Agreement, The ECE Executive Secretary participated in the online celebrations of the entry into force of the Escazú Agreement on 22 April 2021.

52. The secretariat also spoke at a webinar organized by the Centre for International Environmental Law for young people on a rights-based approach to youth activism in international environmental negotiations on 12 November 2020.

53. In addition, the Aarhus Convention secretariat continued to provide advice to various ECE subprogrammes, international forums, academic bodies, NGOs and other stakeholders upon request.

54. The Aarhus Clearinghouse was being increasingly used to disseminate information about public consultations and other relevant information under various international processes and forums.

C. Coordination and oversight of intersessional activities

55. During the reporting period, the status of the Convention with regard to accession, ratification or approval remained unchanged. On 3 September 2020, Albania accepted the GMO amendment. As at 31 March 2021, there were 47 Parties to the Convention and 32 Parties to the GMO amendment. The ratification of the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers by Italy on 23 November 2020 raised the number of Parties to that instrument to 38.

56. Coordination and oversight of intersessional activities during the reporting period were conducted by the Working Group of the Parties and its Bureau during regular meetings of those bodies.

57. The Bureau held its forty-sixth and forty-seventh meetings online on 25 and 26 February 2020 and 6 November 2020, respectively. The Bureau also held regular electronic consultations on different subjects.

58. The secretariat continued the preparations for the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention back-to-back with the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, expected to be held in Geneva from 18 to 22 October 2021.

³⁰ Available at www.unep.org/news-and-stories/statements/joint-statement-united-nations-entities-right-healthy-environment.

³¹ For additional information, see www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/events/geneva-roadmap-40-11-milestones-and-opportunities-in-2021/.