

**Seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention,
fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs**

Joint High-level Segment, 21 October 2021, Geneva

Agenda item 3: Thematic session on the role of the Convention and its Protocol in promoting sustainable infrastructure and spatial planning

Statement for the General Debate - Germany (Speaker: Ms Birgit Schwenk):

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good day everyone. It is a pleasure to be here and to participate in this interesting thematic session on the role of the Convention and the Protocol in promoting sustainable infrastructure. From the speakers we already heard many different perspectives and I am happy to share with you some experiences from Germany.

Sustainable infrastructure is a very important topic on the political agenda in Germany. We all know that technical infrastructure systems are immensely important for life in modern societies. Cities and regions cannot function without infrastructures for supplying energy and drinking water, for disposal of wastewater, for ensuring mobility and for providing information and communications technologies. Without a functioning infrastructure, everyday life is not possible; it is of fundamental importance to us.

However, everything comes at a price: The construction, operation and use of technical infrastructures are not only cost-intensive; they also require an enormous amount of resources ranging from materials to energy to land.

From an environmental and climate policy perspective, the concrete design and configuration of infrastructures is therefore very important for sustainable development and not least relevant for achieving national and EU-wide climate targets.

From my point of view, in this context, the Aarhus Convention plays a crucial role in two respects: On the one hand, the implementation of the Conventions principles supports the development of new and creative ideas for a sustainable infrastructure. On the other hand, it ensures that measures that are necessary in the context of building a sustainable infrastructure also find acceptance among the public.

The German government is funding a large number of projects related to sustainable urban development. These include, for example, model projects in municipalities that want to use digitization strategically to support an integrated, sustainable and public interest-oriented urban development. The German government is funding these model projects with a total of 820 million euros.

There is also a large funding programme to support municipalities in our coal-producing regions, which are undergoing fundamental structural change in consequence of the German government's decision to phase out coal by 2038, in achieving sustainability goals. Our aim is to help these regions become new model regions for the transition to a more sustainable economy and infrastructure – for instance in the field of sustainable tourism.

Many of the funded model projects rely on public participation; a large number of cities and municipalities see that their strategies are only successful if they include the expertise of entrepreneurs, scientists and citizens. And that brings us to my

second point: ultimately, acceptance and support from the local public is just as important as good ideas. This is where the second pillar of the Aarhus Convention in particular plays a crucial role. On the path to a climate-neutral society, the population must be actively involved. Our funding programme in our coal-producing regions is an obvious example: In these regions in particular, public acceptance of structural change from coal to new sustainable sources of income is key. Public participation in building sustainable infrastructure is a crucial element of fostering such acceptance.

In order to ensure that the important public participation processes continue during the Covid-19 pandemic, we reacted very quickly and introduced a new law to enable digital participation. However, by doing so we did not lose sight of the parts of the population without access to the internet and therefore also offer analog alternatives. Overall, our experience with the new legislation has been very good.

In the end, digitization cannot only help creating a more sustainable infrastructure but at the same time digitization itself can create more transparency in the development of municipal strategies and facilitate the participation of citizens. Here, the investment pays off in two ways.

Now I look forward to further thoughts on this exciting topic!