

Seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention
Agenda item 6 (a)

Statement by the Chair of the the Task Force on Access to Information
Ms. Valentina Tapes

Good morning, distinguished delegates,

I would like to present you the results of the work of the Task Force on Access to Information during this intersessional period.

Advancing public access to environmental information, taking advantage of modern digital technologies, remained a key priority for the Task Force.

During the current intersessional period, the work of the Task Force has been carried out in accordance with decision VI/1 of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention.

The Task Force held its sixth and seventh meetings from 2-4 October 2019 in Geneva and 16-17 November 2020 online and supported the organization of a thematic session on access to information in the Working Group of the Parties at its twenty-second meeting (Geneva, 19-21 June 2018). In addition, the Task Force and the European Environment Agency as a partner organization organized a joint workshop on widening access to open data for the environment. Despite the situation resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, the Task Force has been able to fully fulfill its mandate.

As part of its mandate, as defined by decision VI/1 of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, the Task Force worked on a number of issues, presented the results in the form of reports, background papers, statements and presentations, and identified priorities and next steps. Through the meetings and a joint workshop, over 60 experts presented their experiences and lessons learned in promoting access to environmental information on various topics.

In particular, the Task Force facilitated the exchange of experience and information on the following issues.

The first issue is active dissemination of environmental information.

The work focused on:

(i) updating the recommendations on electronic information tools adopted through decision II/3, taking into account trends in initiatives such as the shared environmental information system, geospatial information management, Earth observation data, e-

government, open government data, public sector information reuse, and other relevant initiatives in the region, as well as recent technological advances;

(ii) providing the public with all necessary information in the event of an imminent threat to human health and the environment. This issue is closely related to the development of a multi-hazardous early warning system and the activities of the International Health Regulations of the World Health Organization in connection with the emergence of public health risks of international concerns, for example, in connection with radioactive and chemical accidents;

(iii) application of modern technologies by the public for the collection, use and exchange of environmental data and information, including the development of citizen science;

The second issue is public access to certain types of environmental information, in particular:

(i) environment-related product information;

(ii) information on genetically modified organisms;

(iii) information on emissions to the environment;

iv) information in the framework of environmental decision-making procedures.

The third issue is the application of restrictions on access to environmental information in accordance with the Convention.

In particular, this issue concerned internal correspondence within the public administration in order to better understand the specific competencies of public authorities and to facilitate public access to the requested information. The discussion also touched on the application of restrictions in connection with the coronavirus disease pandemic. Taking into account the different approaches of the Parties in regulating these issues and the need to constantly review the application of such restrictions so that they do not create barriers to access to environmental information, it is necessary to continue the exchange of experience and good practices in this direction.

The fourth issue is the effective protection of whistleblowers, other environmental defenders, and those exercising their rights under the provisions of the Convention.

In this area, the Parties still have a lot of work to do in connection with decisions taken at the level of the European Union and the Council of Europe to strengthen the protection of whistleblowers.

Dear colleagues, let me now highlight the work done in relation to **updating the Recommendations on Electronic Information Tools**, which was carried out with the participation of a wide range of Parties and stakeholders with a view to submitting them to the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention for consideration at the seventh meeting. The project

was discussed at the sixth and seventh meetings of the Task Force on Access to Information and submitted for consideration at the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth meetings of the Working Group of the Parties.

Let me remind you that the draft updated Recommendations aim to support the implementation of the Convention in connection with other relevant international commitments such as the environment-related Sustainable Development Goals and targets, the Paris Agreement, other multilateral environmental agreements, the Sendai Framework for Risk Reduction disasters 2015–2030, several Human Rights Council resolutions and related commitments through the World Meteorological Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Program, the Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference and the Group on Earth Observations. Finally, they aim to enhance knowledge sharing and technology transfer to bridge the digital divide, which critically limits the potential benefits and applicability of such tools.

The draft includes recommendations on general policy, priority types of information and their accessibility, tools and infrastructure, involvement of the public, operators and other stakeholders, governance, institutional development and capacity building, and a clearing-house mechanism under the auspices of the Convention.

The recommendations are accompanied by a separate addendum clarifying terminology, data exchange and management principles, and standards for a nationwide digital environmental information system. The draft recommendations take into account trends in the overall environmental information system, geospatial information management, Earth observation data, e-government, open government data, public sector information reuse and other relevant initiatives, as well as experiences with new or emerging digital technologies.

The recommendations determine the next steps for the Parties and the directions of international cooperation in this area; there is still a lot of work to be done by everyone to achieve the desired results. To strengthen the capacity of Parties to use electronic information tools to implement the Convention and to apply these recommendations, the Task Force has prepared a constantly updated compendium of 50 case studies electronic information tools on various aspects of the implementation of the Convention. Also, relevant resources in the Aarhus Clearinghouse will include keywords related to the implementation of the recommendations.

Dear colleagues, let me also emphasize the importance of the **issue of public, consumer access to environment-related product information**, in light of the forthcoming mandate of the Task Force on Access to Information.

The Task Force at its sixth meeting agreed on the need to achieve a number of far-reaching results. Recognizing the importance of such access and supporting the implementation of Article 5, paragraphs 6 and 8 of the Convention, the Task Force calls for additional measures to:

(a) developing and improving frameworks related to ecolabelling, energy labeling, product passports, product declarations, warning labels, environmental public procurement mechanisms and the efficient use of pollutant release and transfer registers;

(b) Supporting multi-stakeholder dialogue, bringing together various actors such as suppliers, manufacturers, retailers, consumers and environmental NGOs to promote transparency, traceability and accountability in consumer products;

(c) facilitating interoperability of product information systems using the best available modern digital technologies and open data principles.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all experts from Parties, partner organizations and other stakeholders who have supported the work of the Task Force over the years to achieve the announced results and fulfill the mandate of the Task Force. I request the Meeting of the Parties to adopt decision VII/1 on promoting effective access to information and updated recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools.

Thank you for attention.