



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to participate in person to the Seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and to celebrate the Twentieth Anniversary since the entry into force of the Convention.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recognizes a close connection between protection of environment, security and peace, and therefore it aims to strengthen co-operation on environmental matters as a way to prevent conflicts and build mutual confidence between countries. The promotion of good environmental governance, also through the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements, is one of the main instruments available to address global environmental challenges, and the fruitful collaboration with the UNECE is a relevant part of this approach.

Transparency, accountability and public participation in decision-making are guiding principles of the OSCE's support in promoting good environmental governance among its participating States. The importance of good governance in environmental matters to achieve sustainable development, to protect the environment and to promote green economy is reflected in our work and integrated in the OSCE commitments going back to its establishment in 1975 with the Helsinki Final Act.

Since 2002, the OSCE is supporting the establishment and the operation of the Aarhus Centres and the Public Environmental Information Centres, with the aim to facilitate the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and turning its principles into concrete action on the ground. The Centres, which are currently operating in 16 countries of the OSCE area, enable platforms where public institutions, local administrations, civil society and the private sector jointly address environmental challenges in their communities and seek solutions. In other words, the Centres are a bridge between citizens and authorities, working on a wide range of activities, including: raising public awareness on environmental issues, disseminating environmental information, organizing public hearings, monitoring local environmental hotspots, as well as engaging local communities, youth and women in environmental initiatives.

Every year, the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities organizes the Aarhus Centres Annual Meetings, a unique opportunity to share experiences and best practices, as well as to discuss the role of Aarhus Centres in fostering good environmental governance at national and regional level. This year's meeting, held on 23 and 24 September 2021, focused particularly on the role of Aarhus Centres in times of disaster and in green recovery, on their activities to empower women, on the ways to increase the visibility of the Aarhus Centres, and on their contribution to promoting the Agenda 2030 on sustainable development.

As part of the capacity-building activities undertaken by the OSCE, I would like to mention the recently updated "*Guidelines on Gender Mainstreaming in Aarhus Centres Activities*" that aims to assist Aarhus Centres' staff, partners, and relevant stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective into their work and to realize national and international commitments on gender equality. The Guidelines are based on the Aarhus Convention Strategic Plan, therefore we very much look forward to the discussion and decision on the Strategic Plan for 2022–2030.

The Aarhus Centres and Public Environmental Information Centres can be instrumental to raise public awareness, support national authorities and facilitate implementation of other Multilateral Environmental Agreements. In this context, the OSCE, in close coordination with the UNECE, promoted the publication of a multi-lingual set of selected elements in pictures of the "*Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context*" and its "*Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment*". The Aarhus Centres network will be involved in disseminating this easy-to-memorize set of drawings to a non-expert audience with limited knowledge and awareness of the Espoo Convention and its Protocol. The intent is to raise awareness of all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Convention of limits and key areas of their applications and basic obligations, as well as of the functioning and the benefits stemming from them.

Furthermore, since 2015 the OSCE has been partnering with the Aarhus Centres for implementation of the EU-funded project on Stakeholder engagement for Uranium Legacy Remediation in Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, together with the OSCE Field Operations in these countries, and in partnership with UNDP.

The OSCE is also involved in translating and disseminating the "*Maastricht Recommendations on promoting effective public participation in decision-making in environmental matters*" among its participating States. In this framework, I am pleased to inform the Parties to the Convention that a national workshop aimed at raising awareness on this valuable tool will be organized in Armenia in January 2022.

In conclusion, reassuring on the OSCE engagement in providing support to implement the Aarhus Convention and other relevant Multilateral Environmental Agreements, I would like to extend my gratitude for the fruitful and continuing collaboration to the UNECE Secretariat to the Convention, the Parties, the National Focal Points, the Aarhus Centres and all the stakeholders active in promoting the principles of the Convention.