

3(a) Thematic session on access to information

Keynote statement by Emma Pagliarusco, Youth and Environment Europe at the twenty-sixth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention

Your excellencies, dear members present, observers present and panelists,

Building upon art.5 paras. 6 and 8 of the Aarhus Convention;

I will speak on behalf of Youth and Environment Europe, the largest network of environmental youth organizations in Europe, and European ECO Forum to introduce the perspective of youth organizations on enhancing access to environment-related product information in accordance with the latest progress achieved at the Convention and UN level.

The latest developments on access to environmental information, namely decision VII/1 promoting effective access to information; the updated recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools and the UN Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information are important steps that can help to ensure environment-related product information is accessible to the youngest generations.

At this stage, in fact, while accessing environmental information is to be considered a universal right essential to the achievement of sustainable development, it is still rarely exercised by young people: we encounter a general lack of awareness on access to information rights, and a still void to marginal role of youth in the Convention-related processes.

Nevertheless, the right to access information is at the basis of the implementation of the right to live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and a key instrument for the achievement of intergenerational justice.

That said, the above mentioned recommendations and guidelines on environment-related product information and electronic information tools contribute to

building a framework of protection for young people through empowering them as consumers.

More specifically, decision VII/1, by requesting to consider the latest digital solutions such as “product passports” includes the possibility to reach the highest number of young consumers and allowing the public to make more informed purchasing decisions.

As young people are particularly receptive to green claims, it is necessary to protect them from, among others, greenwashing practices: the adoption of “product passports” will drastically reduce the threat of greenwashing claims, which put young people in a position of danger and vulnerability considered their general willingness to purchase sustainably.

Moreover, “product passports” have the long term potential of contributing to driving towards a more sustainable future and thus to protect the rights of future generations faced with the climate and biodiversity crisis. By this we mean that being a tool to promote circular economy, they are extremely crucial for the sustainable transition.

Additionally, “product passports” and smart use of digitally enabled innovation can support young entrepreneurs within sustainable business and green products, representing a starting point for a change in the economic system and for rewarding good practices. Among others, young people involved in start-ups on green products have to be safeguarded from unjust competition and thus compete in a transparent framework in order to be key players in a more sustainable future.

That said, we highlight that a more systemic integration of the youth perspective has to be implemented and gaps have to be bridged: for example, while electronic information tools have the power to reach, involve and empower young people, the 2021 recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools only include two small references to youth, namely paras.38 and 50. These two paragraphs picture youth as among the “potential users” of electronic information tools; and more generally as “groups of the public”, but no more detailed reference is provided, despite electronic information tools being extremely used by young people to exercise the right to access environment-related information. We believe that youth still bears a passive role in the Convention developments, while we should instead be active stakeholders.

To sum up, we need to immediately recognise that youth are among the drivers of change towards a sustainable mode of development, and that our full potential is still hindered by the various hurdles we find in accessing environmental information.

We reiterate that the Convention recognises

“that every person has the right to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being, and the duty, both individually and in association with others, to protect and improve the environment for the benefit of present and future generations”.

According to this we have to build a more systemic youth engagement and protection from the exposure to greenwashing and environmental unfriendly practices; and we believe that the use of electronic information tools and the adoption of “product passports” are ways to engage young people as important stakeholders; other than to build capacity in a structured and inclusive way.

We therefore would like to present you with the following recommendations:

1. To ensure that the adoption of “product passports” respects the aim of making environmental information more accessible to young consumers; and does not on the contrary fall within bureaucratic hurdles that stifle innovation and discourage them from exercising this universal right.
2. Secondly, to secure fundings for youth organizations to ensure regular and substantial youth participation at the Aarhus Convention level and representation of young people. Up until now youth organizations have played an important role in raising awareness and building capacity on access to information rights and available tools, helping them to overcome the technical barriers of the Aarhus Convention. However, in order to meaningfully promote the right to access environmental information more generally, we need further representation at the decision-making level: only in this way young people can play an active role as stakeholders.

To conclude, “sustainable consumption and production can only be achieved if all value chain stakeholders play their parts and commit to more environmentally and socially

sound actions”¹, including young consumers.

Thank you.

¹ UN Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information