



European Ecoforum Statement 3 from Attracta Uí Bhroin for:

3. (b) Public participation in decision-making

Timing: Wednesday, 22 June, 12.30–1 p.m.

(Version 2 – Clean)

Honourable Chair, Distinguished delegates, Dear Participants,

For those enjoying advantages of good education, means, access to technology and the internet - the drive to put information and processes online to allow for social distancing because of the Covid pandemic- in certain instances precipitated technological progression and ~~eased access~~ facilitated access & participation

However, for those without those advantages – the divide became even greater in how they were disadvantaged in participating in decisions impacting upon the environment ~~they are dependent on~~ ~~depend upon~~. This disadvantage is all the more egregious as they are in turn also less resourced and able to mitigate against the negative impacts of those decisions - be it the mis-placement or poor design of services, or the negative impacts of decisions which they have not been able to input into and seek mitigation of those ~~effects~~ impacts. The voiceless, and those who have been un-heard – can now be at even greater risk of distance and being disadvantaged in the discourse of **others** on environmental decision-making.

So It was most welcome that the Task Force's 9th report had such a focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups, and that Decision VII/2¹–identified *inter alia* the importance² of identifying the main obstacles for ~~the~~ their effective participation.

We wish to urge ~~specific~~ relevant tangible granular actions be identified and actioned.

Specifically, if we are to leverage ~~on~~ i.a. National Implementation Reports in our response we must ensure we are, identifying and capturing all the right information, and taking steps now to ensure that can be done meaningfully.

We need to work together to identify who is disadvantaged and how, and to recognise that is a dynamic and changing set of groups and individuals. The emerging energy and food crisis – has created a chilling phrase “heat or eat” amongst those who previously did not have to consider such choices, and for others who have for long ~~already~~ struggled with such choices, it has become even starker.

All the solutions and good-will in the world – are set at nought if those they are intended for – simply do not have the appetite or capacity to engage. It is hard to be concerned about some new development, if you are struggling to feed your family, or dealing with fundamental disadvantages

¹ Decision VII/2 of the 7th Meeting to the Aarhus Convention on promoting effective public participation

² Para 13(d) of Decision VII/2 on promoting effective public participation ECE/MP.PP/2021/CRP.2

https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ECE_MP.PP_2021_CRP.2_0.pdf

and discrimination impacting your ability to work, socialise, get access to medical or educational services, or to be treated equally at the most basic levels in respect of your gender, ethnicity or social background. Different approaches are needed for different cohorts of marginalised and vulnerable groups. We must start by identifying them together, and working to understand the disadvantages and how they manifest as obstacles to participation, and how that situation can be transformed, and interest sparked and facilitated so these voices are heard in a true environmental democracy.

We would welcome an opportunity to engage further with the task force and share with interested parties on the ideas and experience of ~~an~~ a relevant EU level project called The Real Deal³ – which a number of ~~EcoForum~~ Ecoforum members are engaged in.

The plight of refugees who have had to flee their homeland due to conflict from so many war torn areas of the world, or from famine or persecution, has created whole new communities in our midst, and will into the future with the increasing reality of climate refugees. There is a real imperative that these new communities are integrated and included in the decision-making which effects them, alongside existing communities to avoid the potential for unrest and resentment.

I highlighted earlier how new technologies can inflict disparity but they can also be transformational, but it is essential that the communities they are intended for are central to the design and specification and evaluation of such tools, and that those

Also we must be wary of seeing interests too narrowly and of infantilising input to decision-making. Some of our most vulnerable to the environmental decisions being made today, and indeed not being made, are our youth and those not yet born. *[It is not just the local decisions on the design of a library that is important to them – but the really major decisions on our energy solutions and economic activity which will have lasting and transformational impact on the world they will live in.]* Some of those most vulnerable to the decisions we make – make not even lie within our jurisdictions. Transboundary consultation has never been more important than it is today.

Finally, our real challenge is not just to engage all vulnerable and marginalised groups, but to ensure they are heard and that their voice is afforded proper significance and consideration in the decision-making. Because effective participation means exactly that. It means a two way street – which is not just about providing an avenue for input – but also ensuring a channel is listening, ~~to give~~ giving due consideration and responding appropriately.

Attracta Uí Bhroin

³ <https://www.wecf.org/real-deal> The project is about engaging citizens in the participation and in deliberative processes around the European Green Deal, focussing also on identifying and engaging disenfranchised groups