



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

26th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention Geneva, 22-23 June 2022

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Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address the 26th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and I would like to express my appreciation to the Aarhus Convention Secretariat for the organization of this event in person.

Since its establishment in 1975, my Organization (the OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), recognizing the link between environment, sustainable development and security, has considered the role of co-operation on environmental issues as an essential element of its broader effort to prevent conflict, strengthen stability and promote good neighbourly relations.

The promotion of good environmental governance, including the support provided to the participating States for the implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements like the Aarhus Convention, is a key aspect of the OSCE effort to achieve sustainable development and enhance environmental protection. In this framework, allow me to thank the UNECE for the fruitful and continuing collaboration in promoting economic and environmental cooperation in our region.

One of the most effective tools promoted by the OSCE to achieve sustainable development and to support the implementation of the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention are the Aarhus Centres and the Public Environmental Information Centres. Since 2002, the Centres serve as a platform to engage citizens, public institutions, NGOs and the private sector in addressing environmental challenges, in raising public awareness on environmental issues, in disseminating environmental information, and in helping citizens exercise their rights on environmental matters.

As of today, the Aarhus Centres Network counts more than 50 Centres in 16 countries of the OSCE area, and new ones could be established in the future, as in the case of Ireland and Northern Ireland where the local stakeholders are exploring the possibility of an all-island Aarhus Centre. The Centres are engaged in a large number of issues, including public awareness, environmental education, water management, disaster risk reduction, climate change and waste management, to name a few. With the intention to provide a common vision and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Centres in implementing the three pillars of the Convention, recently the OSCE developed a comprehensive

Strategy and Action Plan with recommendations to assist their focused and self-sustainable operation and their future activities.

Every year the OSCE organizes the Aarhus Centres Annual Meeting, which brings together representatives of the Centres, National Focal Points to the Aarhus Convention, international organizations, and civil society. This year's meeting will take place on 19 and 20 October in Vienna, in a blended format. The meeting will focus on the contribution of the Aarhus Centres to strengthen peace and security, more specifically on their role in times of conflict and post-conflict recovery by supporting the countries to ensure the Convention's obligations, including facilitating access to justice in environmental matters and mitigating the risk of harassment and violence against environmental defenders. Other sessions of the meeting will be devoted to the contribution of the Aarhus Centres to waste management, including hazardous waste, and to the development of effective fundraising strategies aimed at promoting the financial sustainability of the Centres.

It is worth mentioning that the OSCE developed guidelines on gender mainstreaming for Aarhus Centres' staff, partners and stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective into their work and to realize national and international commitments on gender equality.

I'd also like to highlight the involvement of the Aarhus Centres in the implementation of the 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.

Dear Participants, in January 2022 the OSCE organized a two-day workshop on "*Maastricht Recommendations on Promoting Effective Public Participation in Decision-making in Environmental Matters*" in Armenia. The purpose of the workshop was to raise awareness of governmental institutions, sectoral ministries, as well as Aarhus Centres, civil society and environmental authorities about the benefits, obligations and rules of the Maastricht Recommendations, an effective tool to improve the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment. The event was evaluated as very useful by the participants, who also expressed interest in further capacity development activities in this area.

More recently, in April, the OSCE joined the UNECE and other partners in the Judicial Colloquium on "*Adjudication of cases related to climate change and air quality*", which aimed to strengthen competencies of judiciary institutions and other review bodies to effectively handle cases related to those sectors.

In conclusion, I would like to mention the ongoing cooperation with the UNECE in the organization of an experts' round table in Uzbekistan devoted to the discussion of benefits and procedures for the country to join the Aarhus Convention. This event will also involve representatives of neighbouring countries already Parties to the Convention.

I thank you for your attention and assure you that the OSCE remains strongly committed in supporting the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and in continuing a fruitful cooperation with the UNECE.