

Agenda Item 2: Ensuring Effective Public Participation

ADDITIONAL STATEMENT BY AGNI GKOUTZIAMANI, YOUTH AND ENVIRONMENT EUROPE, AT THE 10TH AARHUS TASK FORCE ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Dear Madam Chair, dear stakeholders, dear colleagues

As a representative of Youth & Environment Europe and being an environmental activist myself, I would like to bring the voice of youth to the table by focusing on its role in public participation processes.

The Aarhus Convention is created to empower the role of citizens and civil society organizations in environmental matters.

As it is also mentioned in Art.10 Rio Declaration, “Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level.” When we refer to all citizens, we have to keep in mind that there is no single public. The decisions made through the public participation process take into consideration an array of views from a wide variety of people. But what is important to highlight is that, youth represents 13% of the world’s population. Therefore it is crucial to create a seat on the table for the young generation in order to promote democratic legitimacy & intergenerational justice.

From our experience, youth has faced many challenges during policy making decisions such as insufficient consideration of the views’ expressed or limited seats in the discussions which do not correspond to the delegation of decisions to other, more legitimate, citizens such as institutional or civic associations representatives. Rather, it represents an exclusionary process that generates passive and disengaged forms of citizenships. Apart from these challenges, it is important not to forget the logistics, as youth many times is deprived from participating in such procedures due to lack of financial and administrative support from the institutions.

From our point of view, public participation requires more than simply following a set of procedures; it requires the possibility of creating a tangible impact. Young people should be seen as high value resources who are experiencing the climate crisis and can add the perspective of the future in the discussions. This will lead to the creation of intergenerational policy partnerships and will strengthen the concept of democratic society.

In order for youth to be actively engaged in public participation, its role needs to be institutionalized in policy-making.

There are various ways this can be achieved at all levels.

- States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available, by communicating it also to sources which are easily accessible from youth, such as Universities.

- There is a need for a stronger interconnection between educational and policy institutions. This will equip young people with the right tools to respond promptly to the opportunities of participation.
- Young people are very well educated for what concerns information and communication technologies and at the same time there is a wave towards the climate movement. By making use of the power of social media and the passion about the environment that youth shares, institutions can accelerate their involvement. For example, through the promotion of the existing EU Youth Report and the creation of youth advisory committees included in the processes of public participation, the young generation can gain the stakeholder role.

Climate change is present and it is the children and young people of today who will face the worst effects of tomorrow. Therefore, it is a duty to the future generations to engage them substantially in the public participation process, as the Aarhus Convention is not only an environmental agreement, but also sets the government's accountability, transparency and responsiveness.

Thank you for your attention