

**Agenda item 1: Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda
27th Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention
Geneva, 26-28 June 2023**

Thank you, Chair, for this opportunity to make a few opening remarks on this occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Aarhus Convention's adoption.

I think each one of us here in this room, and those listening now, has some story to tell about how the Convention has changed the world we live in for the better. We have stories about radical change to legal regimes concerning access to information, the creation of entirely new ones for public participation, and breaking through previous barriers to access to justice. We have stories about the recent climate negotiations in Bonn, where Aarhus Parties finally began to step up in a manner reflecting article 3(7).

No one could have imagined 25 years ago the world we live in now. GMOs and their impacts were so poorly understood back then that they were not even properly included in the Convention. We did not have COVID. And we did not have Russia's war against Ukraine, which has caused unspeakable human suffering and environmental damage.

We are living in dark times, which means our candles must burn all the brighter. We have to look forward, and take all steps now to ensure that, when we celebrate the 30th, 40th, and 50th anniversary of the Convention's adoption, we will have as many accomplishments, if not more, to celebrate. We must start here and now in Geneva.

Parties need to deliver on all promised financial contributions for the Convention and contribute more as an urgent matter. We need to continue our work in Geneva, but also not just leave it here in some sort of bubble. We need to implement the Convention back in our home countries. We need to assist Ukraine in its efforts to fulfill its obligations under the Convention, and a meaningful starting point is assisting in the determination of what environmental harms have occurred in the first place. We need to support NGOs, which are on the front lines for democracy and environment. We need to act collectively to ensure Aarhus rights in international fora. And throughout, we need to protect environmental defenders, many of whom are in vulnerable situations, as no Aarhus rights can be ensured without this protection.

Some of us may feel that the Convention was created in easier, better times. That may be even true. But what is also true is that it was made for more, promises more, and must do: More. We have hope, yes, but more importantly we have determination. We must invest in our collective future and put in the work. All of us.