2023 HIGHLIGHTS
Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs
Celebrating 25 years of the adoption of the Aarhus Convention

In 2023, the Aarhus Convention celebrated 25 years since its adoption in the city of Aarhus, Denmark on 25 June 1998.

Today, the Convention continue to lead and inspire actions to promote democracy and the rule of law in environmental matters across the globe. This remarkable treaty offers solid legal framework for furthering human rights relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and drives the development of national legislation and practice towards a common set of international standards, bringing about positive changes that would otherwise not occur.

A number of Parties to the Aarhus Convention organized celebrations in their countries to honour the Convention’s 25th Anniversary.

The event was marked through statements by Parties and civil society representatives at the 27th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention.

The Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee also held a special session at its 79th meeting to celebrate the Convention’s 25th Anniversary.
Accession of Guinea-Bissau
New horizons for environmental democracy in Africa and worldwide

The first country from outside the UNECE region acceded to the Aarhus Convention in April 2023. This opens new opportunities to enhance environmental democracy in Guinea-Bissau and to share experience with other countries in Africa and worldwide. The Convention plays a crucial role in providing the State with a solid framework to strengthen public trust and engagement in environmental decision making.

News piece with more information
Ukraine
Advancing public rights despite the ongoing war

The ongoing war against Ukraine following the invasion by the Russian Federation affects the implementation of the Aarhus Convention, with devastating impacts on people’s lives, on the environment and on social and economic development. Despite these extraordinary circumstances, Ukraine is making significant efforts to implement the Convention and its Protocol. The country reported progress in public online access to environmental information through the newly created EcoSystem, which will also host the National PRTR. EcoZagroza, another system, provides up-to-date information on environmental damage, air quality and radiation. A special procedure has also been developed to facilitate public access to information on environmental matters, whilst addressing security considerations. Public discussions are also being organized and held online in view of the lack of suitable safe shelters.
Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee: providing advisory support to Parties and assisting with implementing their plans of action

The Compliance Committees is currently examining more than 40 communications from members of the public alleging the non-compliance of individual Parties to the Convention. The Committee is also engaged in follow-up procedures with 19 Parties which have previously found to be in non-compliance, to assist them to come into compliance by the deadline set by the Meeting of the Parties of 1 October 2024. Through its follow-up procedures, the Compliance Committee is assisting those Parties to ensure that their laws and administrative and judicial practice provide effective and timely access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice across a broad range of environmental matters, including legislation, plans, policies and activities related to the climate and energy security. In addition to its review of pending communications and its follow-up procedures, the Committee provides advice and assistance to Parties upon request. In 2023, the advisory role of the Committee continued to grow. This included a request from Ukraine for the Aarhus Committee’s advice on how to apply the Convention in the context of the ongoing military aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

At its 79th meeting in June 2023, the Committee held an open session to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Aarhus Convention, at which Parties and civil society shared reflections on how the Compliance Committee had furthered the implementation of the Convention. During the session, representatives of other MEA secretariats also shared their insights on how the Compliance Committee had been inspiration for their MEAs’ own implementation and compliance mechanisms.
Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention in times of shrinking civic space and fundamental freedoms

In 2023 the negative trend continued of putting environmental defenders at risk of being penalized, persecuted, harassed, e.g. by publicly labelling them as “eco-terrorists”. Civic space and fundamental freedoms saw greater restrictions in view of changing policies and law enforcement.

In response, Michel Forst, the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, visited a number of countries, considered complaints concerning the persecution, harassment and penalization of environmental defenders, provided input on the development of new instruments and guidance to protect environmental defenders, consulted with vulnerable environmental defenders, spoke during a number of engagements, awareness raising and promotional activities. He highlighted the issue of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) as a common form of harassment of environmental defenders, which presents a major obstacle to the public exercising their rights under the Convention.

On the occasion of the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai, Michel Forst made clear that the triple environmental crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss is a major human rights challenge which it cannot be addressed if those who are fighting against it are not heard.
Access to Justice

Safeguarding climate action and biodiversity protection

Members of the public are increasingly seeking access to justice to reduce exposure to pollution, ensure climate action, or minimize environmental impacts of unsustainable energy-related decision-making. The Convention's Task Force on Access to Justice held its meeting and the Judicial Colloquium (Geneva, 3-5 April 2023), focusing on e.g., cases related to climate change and biodiversity protection; and energy-related and pollution from chemicals and waste-related cases; and on measures removing barriers related to costs, access to assistance mechanisms and timeliness of the review procedures. Representatives of judiciary, judicial training institutions, other review bodies, Parties, academia, NGOs and other stakeholders discussed current trends, good practices, barriers, challenges and innovative approaches in these areas.

News piece with more information  Meeting website

Conferment on environmental justice in Bishkek

Collaboration among judicial communities in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus in addressing global environmental justice issues was fostered during an International high-level judges conferment on environmental justice in Bishkek on 14-16 September 2023. The event was organized by the Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan in cooperation with the Association of Judges of Kyrgyzstan and with the support of international organizations.

More information
Uzbekistan learns from experiences of Aarhus Parties

An international round table “Aarhus Convention: Effective public participation for good governance, healthy environment and sustainable development” held to assist Uzbekistan in its efforts towards the accession to the Aarhus Convention (Tashkent, 1–2 June 2023). Several Parties shared their experiences in implementing the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs with regard to dissemination of environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making at the national and international levels and access to justice, as well as the functioning of Aarhus Centres. Representatives of civil society showcased good practices and international organizations put forward suggestions for a possible support. The Minister for Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change of Uzbekistan and the Chair of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention attended the event.

News piece with more information
Aarhus Convention
Pushing forward actions to uphold environmental rights for all

Aarhus Convention Parties came together for the twenty-seventh meeting of the Working Group of the Parties (Geneva, 26-28 June 2023) to address a range of pressing issues. They took a number of commitments, including with regard to protection of environmental defenders; advancing public participation in decision-making on large-scale infrastructure; promotion of transparency and public participation in international forums dealing with environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context and trade; and on the issue of balanced and equitable participation and different modalities for engaging stakeholders in international decision-making.

Two thematic sessions held at the meeting were dedicated to the public participation in decision-making and promoting the Convention’s principles in international forums. Progress in implementing the current work programme as well as in ratification of the Convention’s amendment on genetically modified organisms were also covered. Other items such as financial matters, promotion of the Convention and relevant developments and interlinkages, were also reviewed. A number of NGOs, Aarhus Centres, international organizations and other stakeholders took part in the event.

Meeting website  News piece with more information
Access to Information and Circular Economy
Advancing public access to environment-related product information

This year’s meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information also featured an international workshop “Advancing public access to environment-related product information: Challenges and opportunities”. Both events aimed at promoting digital access to information in support of green and circular economy and focused on e.g., transparency in the environmental performance of economic activities; effective public access to environmental information on products, on emissions into the environment; and the provision of information to public authorities by third parties, both routinely and in case of an imminent threat to human health or the environment. Examples shared during the meeting included product passports, means to encourage operators to inform the public, and measures against greenwashing.

News piece with more information

Meeting website  Eighth meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information | Geneva, 9 - 10 November 2023
Assisting Mediterranean countries to accede to the Aarhus Convention

Through the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development 2016–2025 countries of the Mediterranean region decided that, by 2025, two thirds of Mediterranean countries will have acceded to the Aarhus Convention. To assist Member States in achieving this goal, a dedicated Training session to promote the Aarhus Convention in the Mediterranean region (Athens, 14–15 November 2023), co-organized by the secretariat, gathered officials from ministries of environment, water, foreign affairs and justice from the countries in the region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Montenegro, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Several participants also followed the meeting online. The main purpose of the training session was to strengthen the expert capacity of representatives of public authorities with regard to access to information, public participation in decision-making in national and international contexts, and access to justice in environmental matters.

Prior to this, the secretariat also presented the Convention and the related experiences at the meeting “Peer-to-peer exchange on overall environmental governance – Promotion of the Aarhus Convention in the whole of the Mediterranean” (online, 8–9 March 2023)

News piece with more information
Protocol on PRTRs
Enhancing interoperability of data

The tenth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs focused on the need for PRTR databases to become interoperable and integrated with other sources of data. Also, the role of PRTRs in promoting synergy among different international reporting obligations were discussed and in breaking down silos across sectors - one of the main requirements for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the transition to green and circular economies. The meeting allowed to further coordination and cooperation with other multilateral environmental agreements and processes dealing with pollution, chemicals and waste, including the recently agreed Global Framework on Chemicals. Delegations also considered preparations for the next session of the Protocol's Meeting of the Parties.

News piece with more information
Meeting website  Tenth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs | Geneva, 27 - 28 November 2023
Protocol on PRTRs
Assisting Parties to improve compliance

In 2023, the advisory role of the Protocol’s Compliance Committee Committees continued to grow. This included a request from Ukraine for the Protocol’s Committee’s advice with regard to its legislation on PRTRs, and advisory support with regard national pollutant release and transfer registers in the European Union member States, focusing on Estonia, Finland, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia.
Protocol on PRTRs
Interlinkages with other processes

The International PRTR Coordinating Group held its 15th meeting in Paris on 25 January 2023. The Group continued to play an important role in furthering synergy and supporting coordination among different organizations dealing with chemicals management.

Furthermore, to enhance collaboration, interlinkages with different processes were promoted, including those related to: OECD Working Party on PRTRs, the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals, UNEP Chemicals Conventions, Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management secretariat, ECE Expert Forum for Producers and Users of Climate Change-related Statistics, international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, ad hoc open-ended working group on a science-policy panel to contribute further to the sound management of chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution, and the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes.
Promoting public rights in LMO/GMO related matters

Fourth Joint Global Roundtable on Public Awareness, Education, Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice regarding LMOs/GMOs was held in Geneva on 11-12 December 2023 under the auspices of the Aarhus Convention and of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The event brought together participants from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean region. The Round table aimed at helping to build countries’ capacities through sharing diverse experiences in these complex subjects. The Round Table resulted in the number of suggestions for future action at the national and international levels. For the first time, the meeting also featured a training session on procedures and practice on access to justice related to LMOs/GMOs.

Meeting website
Aarhus Centres
Raising awareness of the Convention and Protocol and supporting their implementation

Aarhus Centers, with support of OSCE and other partner organizations, continued to play an important role in raising awareness of the public and public authorities through disseminating information and carrying out numerous educational and training activities to assist in implementing the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol. They provide a platform where members public authorities and a wide range of stakeholders, including NGOs, academia, private sector and media can meet to discuss different pressing issues. This year Annual Aarhus Centres’ meeting (Dushanbe, 17 - 18 October 2023), focused on such critical topics as public participation in environmental decision-making, transition towards green economy and sustainable management of chemicals.
The Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs proved to be instrumental in addressing the current challenges faced in the world, including energy system transformation, transition towards green economy and infrastructure, promoting innovation, fighting the corruption and safeguarding environmental defenders.

Due to their cross-cutting nature, they also help to achieve a number of Sustainable Development Goals.
Thank you for all your efforts that helped to promote transparency, better decision-making and the rule of law for the benefit of people and nature!