

## **Aarhus Convention - Twenty-eighth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties**

### **Agenda item 4 (c) Public participation in decision-making**

#### **Statement by Mr. Quintin Oliver, The Consultation Institute / European ECO Forum**

Thank-you for the floor today, and thanks to the Chair, the Secretariat and the Chair of the Public Participation Task Force, whose report we have just heard.; and thank-you delegates for your commitment to this important process.

My name is Quintin Oliver, today speaking for the Consultation Institute, a professional body specialising in public participation and engagement; we research this topic, set standards, deliver quality training and advocate for better implementation of meaningful consultation.

Since the dawn of civilisation, people have sought to shape and respond to human affairs, politics, public policy and social interactions. Athenians debated in the Agora, Romans in their Forum, Africans in their villages, and Asians, Americans and many others in their emerging processes and institutions. They were each striving for meaning, for improvements and for what we now call 'air time', the right to be heard.

Of course the UN Aarhus Convention was not the first to specify and start to codify 'public participation' - but it has over a quarter of a century helped drive the quest for more meaningful engagement of citizens on environmental matters. Its three pillars - information, public participation and access to justice are aligned; they remain integral to successful improvements in the human condition.

The Consultation Institute has followed the trends of public participation over recent years; we find a rich tapestry of methods, ideas, techniques and outcomes wherever we go; but we also notice inconsistencies, weaknesses, short cuts and failings by those charged with responsibility.

For example, Covid brought a double edge of benefits and challenges:

- The acceleration of online discussion, and rapidly improving technologies was a boon for many;
- It allowed the 'democratisation' of some dialogues, bringing in more groups, from further afield, at different levels of hierarchies, at little or no extra cost, carbon and travel;
- It deepened some dialogues, reaching more vulnerable, marginal or hitherto seldom heard groups.

Nevertheless, since pandemic relaxations came in, much retrenchment has been observed:

- Some Consultors are moving to 'online only', thereby disadvantaging some; similarly, and paradoxically, some are reverting to face-to-face only, thereby disenfranchising recently empowered digital participation; both are needed;
- Some are seizing the reduced timescales they piloted during Covid for emergency purposes, and limiting consultation to six, four or even two weeks only, as we just heard from the Client Earth speaker;
- Some are deploying only those active during Covid, as 'stakeholders', thereby restricting proper participation, as the context and its relevant actors churn;
- Some are attracted by the lesser costs of 'online only' and have allowed the shrinkage of public engagement efforts;

The result is more superficial, shallow and fast-tracked public participation, in turn leading to citizen disillusionment and alienation. As we just heard from the Youth Engagement Europe representative from Armenia, young people there are flexing their participatory muscles in defence of their environment, in their case protection of a river from power station degradation.

We heard moving testimony this morning from Ukraine - just imagine the less obvious and less examined environmental destruction and ecocide in Gaza, Yemen, Syria and other conflict zones!

So, what is to be done? The Consultation Institute offers four recommendations:

1. We must redouble our efforts and recommit ourselves to enhanced public participation and engagement under all three Aarhus pillars
2. We must develop, agree and uphold the highest public consultation standards:
  1. The right questions
  2. The right people (stakeholders)
  3. The right information availability
  4. The right timescales
  5. The right methodologies

This should lead to a stronger, more robust and transparent conscientious consideration of consultation submissions,

thereby more likely to gain grudging respect even from disappointed participants and 'loser's consent' to implementation.

3. We strongly promote high quality face-to-face and online interactive training (see, for example <https://www.consultationinstitute.org/learninghub/> );

4. Our experience leads us also to focus on those bodies responsible for monitoring these matters, and for adherence to standards, rules compliance, verification, supervision and regulation.

Finally, this is not just about the dry words agreed in Denmark a quarter century ago, but about the preservation and deepening of democracy itself. That must be our ambition!

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