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### **Multilateral environmental agreements serviced by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Environment subprogramme**

**Note by the secretariat**

#### *Summary*

At its twenty-eighth session (Geneva, 1-3 November 2023), the Committee welcomed the information provided on progress made by the multilateral environmental agreements managed by the Environment subprogramme and underscored the importance of ECE multilateral environmental agreements to foster implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, mitigate and adapt to climate change, reduce disaster risks, prevent and reduce pollution, support the green energy transition and sustainable deployment of renewable energies, protect biodiversity and promote a circular economy.

The present document elaborates on the recent developments under the ECE multilateral environmental agreements, their challenges, plans for the future and common issues of concern.

# **I. Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution (Air Convention)**

## **A. Overview of recent developments**

1. At the forty-third session of the Executive Body, Parties launched the process of revision of the Protocol to Abate Acidification Eutrophication and Ground-level Ozone, as amended in 2012, as a result of follow-up discussions on policy options to address the findings of the review of the Protocol. The review, concluded in 2022, found that, despite the emission reductions achieved, adverse effects on human health, ecosystems and materials continued to occur throughout the ECE region. As on-going efforts would not be sufficient to avoid these harmful effects, further targeted emission reduction measures across sectors including agriculture, energy, transport and shipping, and wide-ranging societal changes in areas such as diet and heating, were needed. At its forty-third session, the Executive Body agreed to include in the revision process consideration of the following issues:

- (a) new emission reduction commitments for the pollutants currently covered by the Protocol;
- (b) potential revisions of technical annexes including with regard to their level of ambition and scope;
- (c) how to deliver further reductions of black carbon emissions;
- (d) whether and how to address methane emissions;
- (e) how to achieve additional ammonia emission reductions;
- (f) new flexibilities, and other approaches for non-Parties to facilitate ratification and subsequent implementation of the Protocol;
- (g) overarching, collective risk-based target(s) to reduce risk to health and ecosystems in the region; and
- (h) how to achieve integrated approaches among climate, energy and air policies.

2. At the same session of the Executive Body, Parties adopted the Guidance document on technical measures for reduction of methane emissions from landfill, the natural gas grid and biogas facilities, the Guidance document on technical measures for reduction of air pollutant emissions from shipping, and a document on co-mitigation of methane and ammonia emissions from agricultural sources. Parties also decided to designate the Jožef Stefan Institute in Ljubljana as the new host of the Meteorological Synthesizing Centre-East, the international centre of the Cooperative Programme for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Long-range Transmission of Air Pollutants in Europe (EMEP).

3. As a result of continued capacity-building activities, Parties in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia improved their emissions reporting in 2023 and 2024. In March 2023, the secretariat launched an e-learning course on How to report emissions under the Convention, which aims to explain the importance of emission inventories for clean air policy development, the requirements for emission inventory reporting and methods for emission estimation. The Russian version of the course on How to report emissions was launched in September 2023. The course was used to prepare national experts for in-depth emission inventory workshops that were held in Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Montenegro in 2023 and 2024. A sub-regional workshop on the Greenhouse Gas Air Pollution Interactions and Synergies (GAINS) Model assisted EECCA countries in developing emission calculations in GAINS and in better understanding emission scenario development. A subregional workshop for Central Asian countries on integrated planning on

climate and air discussed synergies and interlinkages in air pollutant and greenhouse gas emission reporting. The secretariat also worked on a project to assist the Republic of Moldova to develop emission reduction commitments and projections as this is one of the preconditions to accede to the Gothenburg Protocol. In addition, the secretariat organized a workshop on good agricultural practice to reduce ammonia emission from agriculture. The secretariat is also currently working on an e-learning course on the air pollution effects-related work under the Air Convention.

4. In 2024, Parties to the Air Convention have been developing a detailed plan for revision of the Gothenburg Protocol, as amended in 2012. They are furthermore expected to consider proposals for a revision of the rules of procedure for sessions of the Executive Body and for a potential update of the mandate of the Convention's Implementation Committee at the forty-fourth session of the Executive Body.

### **C. Objectives and planned activities**

5. The secretariat will continue its capacity-building activities in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia through the organization of policy-oriented and technical sub-regional and national workshops to promote the ratification and implementation of the Convention and its key protocols in the sub-region.

6. The secretariat will also continue to support the Parties in the work on the revision of the Gothenburg Protocol, as amended in 2012. In 2025, this includes the support of the intergovernmental process with the sixty-third session of the Working Group on Strategies and Review and the forty-fifth session of the Executive Body, and the scientific process with the eleventh joint session of the EMEP Steering Body and the Working Group on effects.

7. In 2025, the secretariat will further continue to support the implementation of the 2024-2025 workplan for the implementation of the Convention, as well as support the development of the 2026-2027 workplan.

## **II. Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and its Protocol on Water and Health**

### **A. Overview of recent developments**

8. 2023-2024 brought a great momentum to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) from outside the Pan-European region, with eight new accessions from three different continents, namely Nigeria, Iraq, Namibia, Panama, the Gambia, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe and Zambia. The Convention now counts eleven Parties from beyond the ECE region (in total 52 Parties). Sierra Leone is also advanced, and more than 20 countries are in the process of accession. In 2025, the provision of tailored guidance to the numerous countries in the process of accession, as well as support to regional and basins dialogues, will be continued, with the support of relevant partners.

9. In the course of 2023 took place the third reporting exercise on the Sustainable Development Goals indicator 6.5.2 and under the Water Convention. 129 countries have so far submitted their replies, i.e., more than 80% of those countries sharing waters, demonstrating the importance attributed to transboundary water cooperation worldwide. The third progress reports on the Convention (for Parties only) and on SDG indicator 6.5.2 have been finalized and launched in October 2024. The SDG indicator report has an innovative focus on climate change and disaster risk reduction.

10. In 2023-, the Convention organized more than 30 events (most of them in-person or hybrid) at national, basin, regional and global levels. Experience was exchanged and new partnerships built at several global workshops including during the Global Workshop on Conjunctive Management of Surface Water and Groundwater (October 2023), the Global Workshop on the Development of Transboundary Water Cooperation Agreements or other Arrangements (November 2023) and the Global Workshop on Funding and Financing Transboundary Water Cooperation and Basin Development (December 2023). In addition, meetings of the Implementation Committee (February and December 2023), Working Groups on Integrated Water Resources Management and on Monitoring and Assessment (June 2023), Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment (October 2023) and the Task Force on the Water-Food-Energy-Ecosystems Nexus (December 2023) took place. Support to on-the-ground projects continued. For example, the Implementation Committee under the Water Convention is assisting Albania and Montenegro in the framework of an advisory procedure to facilitate the development of data exchange on the shared Cijevna/Cem River. In 2023-2024, the secretariat also supported the negotiations on developing an agreement and joint body on the Luapula River and Lake Mweru, shared by the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia. The secretariat facilitated notably the first round of technical and planning negotiations of the draft agreement, including the organization of a capacity-building training session on the use of the Practical Guide for the Development of Agreements or Other Arrangements” (Zambia, April 2024).

11. The Convention secretariat has significantly contributed to the preparatory process and the running of the United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028, or the “United Nations 2023 Water Conference” (New York, 22 to 24 March 2023), including by contributing to the interactive dialogue 4 on water for cooperation, with the organisation of a side event dedicated to the Water Convention and in many other ways. Great recognition of the importance of transboundary water cooperation has been given during the Conference, with more the 70 countries

mentioning it during their plenary statements and more than 20 countries referring to the Water Convention.

12. Finally, the Convention contributed to other global processes and events, such as the World Water Week 2023 and the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28, Dubai, 30 November – 12 December 2023).

13. In 2024, work under the Water Convention focused on the preparation of the new programme of work for 2025–2027 and in the organisation of the 10<sup>th</sup> session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention (Ljubljana, 23–25 October 2024).

14. In 2024, the Water Convention organized more than 20 events (most of them in-person or hybrid) at national, basin, regional and global levels. Experience was exchanged and new partnerships were built a global workshop on drought management in transboundary basins, (February 2024). In addition, meetings of the Implementation Committee (March and July 2024), Working Groups on Integrated Water Resources Management and on Monitoring and Assessment jointly with the Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment (May 2024), and the Task Force on Water and Climate (February 2024) took place. Two national workshops were organized to support the development of national implementation plans in Guinea-Bissau (February 2024) and in Chad (April 2024). The secretariat also organized a regional workshop on transboundary water allocation, WEFE nexus and development of agreements and other arrangements: Supporting exchanges of lessons learned, good practices and practical tools in Zambia (April 2024) and contributed to a number of other regional events including the Fourth Baghdad International Water Conferences (April 2024) and the ECLAC regional water dialogues I Latin America and Caribbean (March 2024).

15. Finally, in 2024, the Convention secretariat provided input to the preparatory process of and took active part in the 10<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum (Bali, 18–24 May 2024) to increase awareness on the Water Convention especially among Asian countries are less engaged in the Convention’s activities. The secretariat also took part in the sixtieth session of the Bonn Climate Change Conference (June 2024) with the organization of side events, into the celebrations of the World Water Day 2024 “Leveraging water for peace” (22 March) and into the 2024 World Water Week (August 2024) whose focus was on cooperation across borders.

16. In 2023, the Protocol on Water and Health, jointly serviced by ECE and the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe), has also experienced a momentum in increasing its membership with accession by North Macedonia and Uzbekistan – the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> Party, respectively – and other States, such as Italy and Kazakhstan, being at advanced stages of accession processes.

17. 2023 was important to increase the Protocol’s visibility and reach within the global and regional communities working on water, sanitation, hygiene and health. In this respect, a side event was co-organized at the margins of the UN 2023 Water Conference (New York, 22–24 March 2023) by Germany, Hungary and Portugal. A side event was also co-organized by France, Hungary and the Republic of Moldova at the margins of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, 5–7 July 2023). Both events were widely attended and with active participation.

18. Furthermore, progress was achieved in the priority technical area of work on increasing resilience to climate change under the Protocol. Following the adoption of a new programme of work for 2023–2025, as well as the beginning of a dedicated project on equity and climate change funded by the United Nations Development Account (UNDA), a Strategic Roundtable on increasing resilience to climate change in the water and sanitation sector (Geneva, 13–14 June 2023), attended by over 100 participants, allowed discussing strategic priorities in increasing climate resilience of water and sanitation, bringing together climate and WASH communities and laying the ground for future work in this area. Back-to-back with the workshop, the Task Force on Target Setting and Reporting held its thirteenth

meeting on 14 November 2023, to review progress with setting, revising and implementing targets under the Protocol, with a particular focus on climate-sensitive targets. A webinar on financing climate adaptation (15 June 2023) was also organized with the aim of introducing key issues and concepts on climate finance, as well as resources available on the topic and some country experience.

19. In the area of work of equitable access to water and sanitation, the ECE secretariat supported two self-assessments in Montenegro and Albania, aimed at establishing a baseline measure of the situation with equitable access to water and sanitation.

20. In 2024, work under the Protocol on Water and Health focused on advancing activities from the programme of work for 2023–2025, including organizing meetings of intergovernmental bodies such as the Working Group on Water and Health (Geneva, 16-17 April 2024), the Bureau (Geneva, 18 April 2024), and the Compliance Committee (Geneva, 2 July 2024). The Bureau and the Working Group meetings laid the ground for the preparation of documents and decisions for the forthcoming 7<sup>th</sup> session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (scheduled to be held in Budapest, on 5-7 November 2025).

21. In terms of progress in the area of work of increasing climate resilience of water and sanitation sector, the background paper for the above-mentioned Strategic roundtable on climate change *Strengthening climate resilience in the drinking water and sanitation sector through the Protocol on Water and Health* was finalized. The sub-regional workshop under the Protocol “Increasing climate resilience of water and sanitation sector in the Mediterranean Region” was hosted by Portugal in Lisbon from 4 to 5 June 2024. The workshop, attended by most Mediterranean countries from UNECE region, as well as some from beyond, allowed taking stock of challenges and priorities and identifying good practices in increasing resilience of water and sanitation sectors among Mediterranean countries, responding to those challenges by promoting setting of climate-sensitive targets under the Protocol, and formulating future needs for its work. Protocol is also contributing to organization of two side events at the 29<sup>th</sup> session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Baku, 11–22 November 2024) and a paper on integration of water and sanitation as well as transboundary cooperation in climate policy documents such as the Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Policies is being produced.

22. Significant progress was also achieved in the area of equitable access to water and sanitation with the forthcoming publication of the Equitable Access Score-card 2.0 – Shaping water and sanitation policies to achieve the human rights to water and sanitation – a flagship ECE tool that has undergone a thorough revision in order to fully reflect the current and emerging challenges in terms of vulnerabilities of water and sanitation sector and take stock of the lessons learned in the ten years of the application of the methodology. Following pilot testing of the revised tool by Montenegro and Albania, Member States endorsed the revisions at the online 7<sup>th</sup> Expert Group meeting on equitable access to water and sanitation (28-28 May 2024) and the final publication is expected to be launched at the upcoming Regional workshop on Equitable Access to Water and Sanitation (Budapest, 11-12 December 2024).

23. 2024 also marked advancing implementation of a number of technical cooperation/assistance activities, including through organization of high-level launching and technical events and supporting further work by national authorities, in the framework of the following projects currently ongoing under the Protocol:

(a) Support to water and sanitation governance in Uzbekistan, including by facilitating the setting of national targets under the Protocol through a project funded by the Swiss Development and Cooperation Agency;

(b) Support for the development of climate-sensitive targets in Montenegro under a project funded by the UNDA 15<sup>th</sup> tranche;<sup>1</sup>

(c) Support to setting targets and developing sanitation policies in the countries of Central Asia, with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan being the main beneficiaries, under a project funded by the Russian Federation.

24. National Policy Dialogues on Integrated Water Resources Management funded by the European Union served as platforms for intersectoral cooperation and water reform in 9 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In 2023, six meetings of the NPD high-level Steering Committees were held in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia. In 2024, NPDs will continue supporting the countries with strengthening the national water governance, including intersectoral cooperation and international cooperation, and advancing the implementation of the water and health agenda. Work under the NPDs will contribute to country-level implementation of the SDG6, the Water Convention, the Protocol on Water and Health, and will further promote water-energy-food-ecosystems nexus.

### **C. Objectives and planned activities**

25. In 2024, the Water Convention will start to implement the activities foreseen in its programme of work 2025-2027. More specifically, the secretariat will continue to promote the Convention and support accession processes in different regions, A number of national, regional and global thematic activities workshops including on new topics such as ecosystems conservation in shared basins will be implemented and organized in partnership with numerous partners including RBOs, IFIs, academia, NGOs and other UN agencies.

26. In 2025, the secretariat will contribute to the preparation of the next 2026 UN Water Conference which aims at accelerating the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 in order to ensure that the issue of transboundary water cooperation is addressed and to raise awareness on the role of the Water Convention in supporting countries to achieve SDG indicator 6.5.2 and in improving the management of transboundary water resources worldwide is recognized.

27. Under the Protocol on Water and Health, still in 2024, the upcoming 14th meeting of the Task Force on Target Setting and Reporting (Budapest, 12-13 December 2024) will, as one of its main objectives, launch the 6th mandatory reporting cycle under the Protocol. At the meeting, the new Protocol online reporting system will also be launched, with the aim of facilitating reporting process by Parties and other States.

28. In 2025, work under the Protocol will focus on the preparation of the new programme of work for 2026–2028, along with the discussions on the strategy for the implementation of the Protocol, and in the organisation of the 7th session of the Meeting of the Parties the Protocol, to be hosted by Hungary. The 7th session will also culminate the reporting exercise under the Protocol.

29. The work on increasing climate resilience will continue with the organization of a global workshop on Water and Climate, to be held jointly with the Water Convention (Geneva, 19-20 March 2025). Support for the development of climate-sensitive targets under a project funded by the UNDA will continue for the Republic of Moldova.

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<sup>1</sup> Project entitled “Equitable Access to water and sanitation services for all and in all settings and climate-resilience in the water and sanitation sector”, for details see <https://unece.org/equitable-access-water-and-sanitation-services-all-and-all-settings-and-strengthened-climate-0>

30. The Protocol will continue supporting eligible Parties and other States in improving water and health governance at national level, including through continuing implementation of the above-mentioned projects.



### III. Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents (Industrial Accidents Convention)

#### A. Overview of recent developments

31. At its twelfth meeting (Geneva, 29 November – 1 December 2022), the Conference of the Parties to the Industrial Accidents Convention recognized the need to address emerging issues of concern for industrial safety, including the energy transition and changes in energy sources, as well as the Convention’s relation to those issues.<sup>2</sup> In 2023, the Bureau established a small group on the industrial safety of the energy transition (ISET) which developed a note outlining areas warranting further work and possible institutional adjustments in the Convention’s subsidiary structure to meet ISET demands and initiated a consultation process to understand member States’ needs and expectations on the basis of a survey (ECE.CP.TEIA/2024/INF.2), which revealed the need for further work in this area nationally and internally. As a result, the Bureau decided to organize a *Seminar on the global energy transition: Strengthening industrial safety to address emerging risks* (Geneva, 27 November 2024) which will take place within the framework of the thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (Geneva, 27-29 November 2024). Following the seminar, the Conference of the Parties will consider a draft decision on work on the industrial safety of the energy transition under the Convention (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/3) and determine how to take this work forward.

32. The Conference of the Parties will also consider a draft decision on the identification of tailings management facilities as hazardous activities (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/11), which recommends updating the *Guidelines to facilitate the identification of hazardous activities for the purposes of the Convention* (decision 2018/1 in ECE/CP.TEIA/38/Add.1) - in order to cover more comprehensively the hazards and risks arising from tailings management facilities. The draft decision and a related background note (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/10) were prepared by the small group on mine tailings safety, comprised of several members of the Convention’s Bureau, the Working Group on Implementation and the Joint Expert Group on Water and Industrial Accidents.

33. In relation to mine tailings safety and governance, the United Nations Environment Programme invited the Convention’s secretariat to cooperate on the implementation of the United Nations Environment Assembly Resolution 5/12 on the environmental aspects of minerals and metals management, particularly to provide information and knowledge on tailings safety that has been generated under the Convention. Positively responding to it, the secretariat, in cooperation with the Aarhus Convention secretariat and the Sustainable Energy Division, shared information on the Convention, the *ECE Safety Guidelines and Good Practices on Tailings Management Facilities*<sup>3</sup> and related tools and roadmaps at all five regional consultations and the global intergovernmental consultation (Geneva, 7-8 September 2023). The meeting documentation<sup>4</sup> expressed the importance of “*building upon the Conventions, expertise and bodies of work presented by the regional economic commission, including UNECE’s Industrial Accidents Convention.*”

34. During the biennium 2023-2024, the secretariat participated in the drafting group and steering committee of the OECD on the development of joint OECD/UNECE/European Commission Joint Research Centre guidance titled *Managing Natech Accident Risk: A Guide for Senior Leaders in Industry and Public Authorities*. The guidance, which has also been

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<sup>2</sup> ECE/CP.TEIA/44, para. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Available from : <https://unece.org/info/Environment-Policy/Industrial-accidents/pub/21637>

<sup>4</sup> Report-UNEA 512 Global Intergovernmental Meeting ([greenpolicyplatform.org](https://greenpolicyplatform.org))

reviewed by the Convention's Bureau, has now been finalized and is planned to be published in 2024.

35. In addition, the secretariat prepared the United Nations publication titled *Risk Assessment for Industrial Accident Prevention: An Overview of Risk Assessment Methods, Selected Case Studies and Available Software*, on the basis of two reports reviewed by the Conference of the Parties at its twelfth meeting. The publication provides an introduction to risk assessment methodologies for industrial accident prevention and eighteen case studies on methodologies applied at selected industrial facilities in the ECE region, including with five of those industrial facilities having potential to cause transboundary effects if an accident were to occur. The publication was issued in 2024 in English, French and Russian.<sup>5</sup> A slideshow to accompany the publication has also been developed for promotional and training purposes.

36. In 2024, the Working Group on Implementation analysed the national implementation reports for the tenth reporting round (2019-2022) and to draw up the tenth report on implementation of the Convention in 2024 (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/5). The Working Group submitted the report and an accompanying draft decision on strengthening the implementation of the Convention (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/6), inclusive of policy and technical recommendations for Parties and other member States, to the Conference of the Parties.

37. During the 2023-2024 biennium, several projects were implemented under the Convention's Assistance and Cooperation Programme, seeking to strengthen policymaking and governance for industrial safety and technological disaster risk reduction, nationally and in a transboundary context.

38. The secretariat continued providing support to Serbia in maintaining its national coordination process of National Policy Dialogue (NPD) on Industrial Safety. The NPD focuses on enhancing cooperation and policymaking, identifying gaps, adopting a multi-hazard, multisectoral approach to disaster risk reduction (DRR), and aligning legislation with the Industrial Accidents Convention, the European Union Seveso III Directive and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. In this context, the secretariat supported Serbia in developing its National Programme on Industrial Safety and holding a stakeholder consultation (Belgrade, 20 September 2023), to review and discuss the Programme. The Programme was finalized in 2023. Serbia is now planning to prepare an action plan for its implementation.

39. A technical mission to Georgia was organized (Tbilisi, 7-9 November 2023) to raise awareness of the Convention and the benefits of accession. Accession to the Convention and its implementation would enable Georgia not only to improve industrial safety at the national level, but also to play an important role in enhancing regional and cross-border cooperation. Moreover, it would support Georgia's accession and law approximation efforts as an EU candidate in multiple areas, including the Seveso III Directive and the Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

40. Furthermore, an ECE-EIB Project on *Strengthening industrial safety in Ukraine through enhanced implementation of and alignment with the Industrial Accidents Convention* was launched in December 2023. Under the Project, Ukraine receives assistance to increase its capacity to enhance the prevention of, preparedness and response to industrial accidents by strengthening the implementation of the ECE Industrial Accidents Convention. The scope of the Project consists of the preparing a report with analysis of the Ukrainian industrial safety legislation with recommendations on its alignment with the main requirements of the Convention and a roadmap for implementation. These draft documents were developed in 2024 in collaboration with Ukrainian national authorities, particularly the State Emergency

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<sup>5</sup> Available from : <https://unece.org/info/Environment-Policy/Industrial-accidents/pub/391975>

Service. These efforts aim to help Ukraine adopt a comprehensive approach to implementing the Convention and strengthen the authorities' capacities to manage industrial risks and mitigate their consequences effectively.

41. Moreover, this biennium saw the continuation of assistance activities addressing mine tailings safety, as industrial safety "hot spots" requiring attention. The secretariat supported Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in holding regular meetings of their Inter-Institutional Working Groups (IIWG) on tailings safety and the prevention of accidental water pollution (Astana, 15 March 2023 and 26 August 2024, and Dushanbe, 4 April 2023 and 15 May 2024). It also supported the establishment of a Working Group similar to an IIWG in Uzbekistan in July 2024, as part of the project on "*Strengthening action in Uzbekistan on water and sanitation and protection of water resources from accidental pollution in the face of climate change*" with funding from the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment, the implementation of which began in December 2023. In the framework of this Project, Uzbekistan is developing a road map for accession in line with its 2019 Concept on Environmental Protection until 2030 of Uzbekistan. In addition, the riparian countries in the Syr Darya River Basin are supported in development of a framework of a Joint Contingency Plan for industrial/tailings accident prevention, preparedness and response.

42. In addition, an on-site training was organized at the Almalyk tailings management facility in Uzbekistan (24-26 September 2024) thanks to support from the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment in the framework of the *Project to strengthen tailings safety and prevent accidental water pollution in Uzbekistan and Central Asia (2021–2024)*. This activity supported Uzbekistan in applying the *ECE Safety Guidelines and Good Practices for TMFs* and enhancing its capacity to accede to the Convention.

43. Tajikistan also made significant progress towards accession, having translated the Convention's text into the national language, reviewed the benefits of accession, based on a note prepared by the secretariat, and submitted a formal proposal to accede to the Convention to the Government in March 2024. The country established a national working group on accession, consisting of representatives of various national authorities, which held its first meeting in May 2024. During the second IIWG meeting, Tajikistan announced its goal to complete the accession process by the end of 2024.

44. Furthermore, ECE also supported sub-regional cooperation and exchange in Central Asia, among others, by means of a subregional workshop on tailings safety and the prevention of accidental water pollution in Central Asia (Dushanbe, 25–26 May 2023). Under the auspices of the Water and Industrial Accidents Conventions, the secretariat supported the four riparian countries of the Syr Darya river basin in mapping their tailings management facilities and other hazardous activities in the Basin, as well as in analysing gaps in national legislation related to joint contingency planning, information exchange and emergency preparedness and response in case of an accident. In addition, the secretariat supported, through a joint ECE-United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) Project, which was completed in January 2023, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in integrating elements of industrial accident risk and transboundary considerations into their national strategic documents prepared under the umbrella of the Sendai Framework.

## **B. Challenges**

45. In conducting its activities, the Convention will seek to address the following challenges:

(a) Ensure that Governments use the full potential of the Convention in ensuring industrial safety, by:

(i) fostering implementation efforts, and progressing with accession, including by effectively benefitting from activities under the Convention's Assistance and Cooperation Programme;

(ii) closely collaborating with each other and sharing information across borders using the Convention as a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange and fostering transboundary cooperation;

(iii) ensuring safety throughout the energy transition, aiming to effectively mitigate climate change and to adapt to it against the background of the growing risk of Natech (Natural hazard-triggered technological accident) events.

(b) Ensure that the Convention and its safety guidelines and other knowledge products are widely known and used beyond the competent authorities under the Convention, by :

(i) encouraging Governments to promote the use of the Convention's knowledge products by all relevant stakeholders, incl. industry representatives, local authorities, academia and the public;

(ii) building partnerships with organizations within and beyond the United Nations system, including the United Nations Regional Commissions, river basin commissions and industry associations;

(iii) promoting the Convention and its knowledge tools at partner events including regional and global fora, including but not limited to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), UNDRR Regional and Global Platforms, and meetings of the Heads of Emergency Authorities of Central Asian countries.

(c) Financing of the Convention's activities through its biennial workplan, by:

(i) reiterating the implementation of the Convention's sustainable financial mechanism adopted at the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties (ECE/CP.TEIA/24, annex) and Decision 2018/2 fostering its implementation (ECE/CP.TEIA/38/Add.1), aiming to establish a system of long-term, sustainable and predictable financing for the implementation of the Convention's workplan generally;

(ii) Urging all Parties to contribute to the sustainable funding of activities so as to share the burden equitably and proportionately;

(iii) encouraging the Parties to consider making predictable, and preferably multi-year, sustainable funding pledges prior to the adoption of the annual workplans.

## **C. Objectives and planned activities**

46. The work under the Convention continues to pursue the following objectives, seeking to further progress in implementing its long-term strategy until 2030 (ECE/CP.TEIA/38/Add.1):

(a) Foster the Convention's full implementation, by continuing to enhance the capacity of Governments to prevent, prepare for and respond to industrial accidents, thereby reducing the risk of cross-border damage to the environment and human health, and to support the accession of non-Parties, including through the Convention's Assistance and Cooperation Programme;

(b) Continue and expand work on relevant policy issues, notably industrial safety aspects linked to decarbonization efforts and the energy transition, climate change, notably Natech events, and land-use planning/siting.

(c) Produce and maintain knowledge products (such as information repositories, safety guidance, publications, videos, training toolkits etc.) and ensure these are known and used by relevant national authorities, operators and stakeholders within and beyond the ECE region;

(d) Continue strengthening strategic partnerships with regional and global organizations and support interactions and knowledge exchange, foster synergies and avoid duplication of work; and

(e) Promote the Convention's approaches, policy tools and guidance at the global level.

47. The Convention will shortly hold its thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, co-organized with the French Ministry of Ecological Transition, Energy, Climate, and Risk Prevention (Geneva, 27–29 November 2024). The CoP will open with a Seminar on the global energy transition: Strengthening industrial safety to address emerging risks. During the meeting, Parties will be engaged in four roundtable discussions, namely on:

(a) Financing;

(b) Disaster risk reduction, natural hazard-triggered technological disaster risk management and climate change;

(c) Mine tailings safety; and

(d) Twentieth anniversary of the Assistance and Cooperation Programme.

48. It is expected that the CoP would, inter alia, elect the new Bureau and Working Group on Implementation, and take a number of important decisions, namely on:

(a) the work on the industrial safety of the energy transition under the Convention (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/3);

(b) strengthening the Convention's implementation (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/6);

(c) the identification of tailings management facilities as hazardous activities (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/11).

49. Following the adoption of the draft workplan 2025-2026 (ECE/CP.TEIA/2024/8), the Convention's activities will focus in 2025 in particular on the following:

(a) Continue addressing the industrial safety of the energy transition, in line with the decisions taken by the Conference of the Parties, including starting a European Commission-supported Project on addressing emerging environmental and industrial risks linked with decarbonization and the global energy transition. This will entail conducting an analysis on emerging risks with energy transition technology, including through a survey, and initiating the development of policy and technical guidelines to address those risks, such as on land-use planning, the siting of facilities and safety distancing.

(b) Organize a Global seminar on early warning and industrial accident notification systems, environmental liability and pollution remediation, in close cooperation with the Water and Aarhus Conventions secretariats, the Joint Expert Group on Water and Industrial Accidents, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and UNDRR;

(c) Continue the work on Strengthening the Safe and Secure Management of Hazardous Substances to Prevent and Mitigate Industrial Accidents Worldwide under the auspices of a European Union funded project, implemented in partnerships with the European Investment Bank (EIB), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Maritime Organization (IMO), UNDRR, UNEP, UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit, WHO, WMO and OECD. Activities will entail developing a report on international instruments, standards and mechanisms available to address risk, including under the auspices of the mentioned partners and across sectors, and an online information repository.

(d) Upgrade the Industrial Accident Notification System to fix its glitches and align with United Nations security requirements;

(e) Facilitate the intergovernmental process for updating the Guidelines to facilitate the identification of hazardous activities for the purposes of the Convention to include a technical methodology for authorities and operators to assess tailings mixtures and tailings management facilities against the Convention, in case of an affirmative decision by the Conference of the Parties at its thirteenth meeting;

(f) Initiate the development of good practices guidance on the implementation of the Convention.

50. In addition, projects and activities under the Assistance and Cooperation programme will continue, with a focus on strengthening governance and policy. ECE will continue supporting countries in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in enhancing their industrial and mine tailings safety, improving inter-institutional coordination and overall strengthening implementation by Parties and supporting accession efforts of the remaining non-Parties. This will comprise:

(a) Supporting beneficiary countries of the Assistance and Cooperation Programme in their implementation of Convention through the implementation of the Convention's Strategic Approach, including support to recent Parties such as Ukraine; and supporting non-Parties, in particular Georgia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in their efforts to accede to Convention;

(b) Continuing support to Serbia, in cooperation with UNDP, in the development of national action plan on industrial safety, as a part of the National Policy Dialogue process initiated by secretariat;

(c) Improving governance and capacity in Uzbekistan in areas of water and sanitation, prevention of accidental water pollution, and resilience to climate change, including through transboundary cooperation and regional exchange. This will comprise support in drafting the law on the accession to the Convention; preparing an outline of a Joint Contingency Plan for industrial/tailings accident prevention, preparedness and response in the Basin; and developing a policy brief on the impact of climate change on the mine tailings safety;

(d) Launching a new project on improving climate knowledge and disaster risk governance for mine tailings facilities in Central Asia, supported by the United Nations Development Account to enhance capacities of national environmental authorities and industry in Central Asia to adapt to and mitigate impacts of climate change on mine TMFs for safer and more resilient societies; and

(e) Continuing support to Central Asian countries' efforts to strengthen policies and governance for the safety of tailings management facilities at the national and regional levels, including through meetings of the IIWGs.

## **IV. Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) and Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assistance (Protocol on SEA)**

### **A. Overview of recent developments**

51. For the Espoo Convention and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment the year 2023 culminated in the ninth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention and the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (Geneva, 12–15 December 2023) which brought together some 50 countries, international organizations, civil society and other stakeholders to discuss how to strengthen the treaties' role in accelerating energy transition, promoting circular economy and enabling the uptake of green financing. The discussions built on a discussion paper prepared with funding from Italy.

52. The Parties adopted decisions on the workplan and the budget and other key decisions prepared by the treaty bodies in the course of 2023 that will shape the treaties' implementation in the next period 2024–2026, including in view of the expected opening of the Convention for any future accession of countries beyond the ECE region, and covering subregional cooperation in six marine regions, with a focus on the Mediterranean Sea, based on the assessment report on synergies and cooperation activities finalized in 2023 in cooperation with 6 regional sea conventions and bodies.

53. Parties also adopted 12 country specific compliance decisions, prepared by the Implementation Committee on Parties' compliance with their treaty obligations, including two regarding the lifetime-extension of several nuclear power plants in the ECE region, as well as hydro power plants or mining activities with potential adverse environmental impact across the ECE. Due to time constraints, the high-level segments of the sessions of the Meetings of the Parties were adjourned. The Meetings of the Parties deferred the adoption of the Geneva Declaration and one decision by the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention to a session to be organized by the Bureau in 2024 specifically for that purpose,

54. At its first extraordinary meeting on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024 (online), the Bureau took decisions regarding the organization of the resumed Meetings of Parties. The resumed high-level segment of the ninth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention and the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol will be organized on 10 December 2024 in Geneva.

55. The year 2024 was further marked by the following highlights:

(a) The secretariat continued to assist Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in the treaties' effective implementation, with funding from the EU4Environment programme due to end in April 2024.

(i) On 15 July 2023, the Agreement on the Implementation of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context between Ukraine and Romania entered into force. The drafting and negotiation of the Agreement was supported by the secretariat and legal experts to ECE to help the countries put into action recommendations from the Meeting of the Parties (concerning compliance by Ukraine with treaty obligations in respect of the Bystroe Canal Project).

(ii) In June - November 2023, the Republic of Moldova was supported in drafting secondary implementing legislation on environmental assessment: regulations for two technical/expert-level commissions that the Republic of Moldova is establishing for quality control of SEA documentation and of EIA documentation respectively. The two draft regulations were finalized in November 2023.

(iii) On 30-31 October and on 24-23 November 2023, Armenia was supported in the more effective practical application of SEA through two inter-linked training events in Yerevan to help representatives of sectoral ministries and local authorities better understand requirements of the Protocol on SEA and of recently amended environmental assessment legislation.

(iv) On 25-26 May 2023, over 500 representatives of local and regional authorities from across Ukraine were trained – at two online training events - on the practical application of SEA in urban planning, as spatial and urban plans are likely to make the bulk of Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction plans.

(b) The treaties’ Implementation Committee considered 45 compliance issues during and in-between its three annual sessions, including regarding the lifetime-extension of many nuclear power plants within the region, building on guidance on that topic adopted in December 2020. The Committee held several formal hearings and informal consultations with the Parties concerned, and prepared findings and recommendations to assist them in the treaties’ effective implementation for adoption by the Meetings of the Parties.

(c) The third, and last, joint technical meeting on synergies and possible cooperation activities in marine regions, was organized (Geneva (online), 16 May 2023), bringing together representatives of the regional sea conventions and commissions and interested focal points under the Espoo Convention and the Protocol. The meeting report and other information presented at the third joint technical meeting, including the good practice case studies on the application by Estonia of the Convention to the Saare offshore wind farm and the application of the Protocol by Italy to its maritime spatial plans can be found on the meeting webpage. The Meetings of the Parties reviewed and agreed on draft decision X/3–V/3 on cooperation in marine regions and the draft report on synergies and possible cooperation activities in marine regions (ECE/MP.EIA/2023/3–ECE/MP.EIA/SEA/2023/3). There are several recommended cooperation activities that have been included in the workplan for 2024–2026.

(d) At their meetings, the Bureau and the Working Group on EIA and SEA finalized the preparations for the sessions of the Meetings of the Parties based on the documentation prepared by the secretariat.

56. In April 2024, the EU4Environment funding for technical assistance and capacity-building activities under the Espoo Convention and its Protocol came to an end. As a result of the decade-long assistance by the secretariat to the countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the beneficiary countries have developed and aligned their legislative frameworks with the two treaties, and enhanced their capacity to implement them, through multiple national and subregional capacity-building activities. Capacity-building under the work plan for 2024 – 2026 is envisioned to be provided bilaterally by Parties to the treaties and partner organizations, rather than by the secretariat.

57. The year 2024 was further marked by the following highlights:

(a) With the latest ratifications of the Protocol by France (16 January 2024) and by Greece (23 October 2024) the Protocol now has 35 Parties. Also, France and Belgium have ratified the first amendment to the Convention in 2024.

(b) The ninth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention and the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (Geneva, 12–15 December 2023) decided to cancel the meetings of the Working Group and the Bureau in 2024, to save resources. However, the subsequent adjournment of the Meetings of Parties and the request to the Bureau to organize resumed meetings of Parties in 2024, required the organization of extraordinary meetings of the Bureau. For 10 months of 2024, the Bureau held its three



extraordinary meetings online. It also was in constant consultation with its members and the secretariat via electronic means.

(c) The treaties' Implementation Committee held three annual sessions in 2024, continuing consideration and follow up to the twenty-three ongoing compliance matters a, holding 4 formal discussions and one informal consultation with the Parties concerned. Elements of three sets of findings and recommendations have been prepared.

(c) Two sub-regional meetings were held on cooperation on the Convention and the Protocol in marine regions:

(i) The Baltic Sea subregional meeting (online, 8 May 2024), organized by Lithuania<sup>6</sup>. The meeting brought together experts from 8 countries around the Baltic Sea<sup>7</sup> and addressed, amongst other topics, national plans in the field of nuclear energy and exchange of experience on environmental impact assessments for offshore wind planning in the Baltic Sea.

(ii) The subregional meeting on environmental assessments in a transboundary context in the Mediterranean Sea (Rome and online, 28-29 May 2024), organized by Italy<sup>8</sup> under the framework of the Espoo Convention and in collaboration with the UNEP/MAP secretariat of the Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea Against Pollution (Barcelona Convention). The meeting brought together representatives of 16 countries around the Mediterranean Sea<sup>9</sup> who exchanged experience about ongoing and forthcoming environmental assessments as well as procedures, bilateral agreements and practical arrangements for cooperation between neighbouring countries.

## B. Challenges

58. The secretariat faced very significant staffing challenges in 2024. The Convention and Protocol Secretary position was vacated in January and remains unfilled for several months. Additionally, the Implementation Committee Secretary resigned in February due to health reasons. To address these vacancies, the secretariat relied on temporary arrangements and the support of a Junior Professional Officer (funded by Italy and France). This situation underscored the fragility of the secretariat's staffing (due to the extremely small size of the team) and the limited reserve capacity within the Environment Division.

59. Financial issues remain a problem as well. The UN regular budget supports only one professional post. The contributions from the Parties remain purely voluntary, and while supporting another professional post, they are not predictable enough for sound long-term planning. The Meetings of Parties in 2023 acknowledged the resource constraints and took steps to reduce costs by cancelling certain planned activities in 2024, such as Working Group and Bureau meetings. However, the need to organize resumed Meetings of Parties in 2024 has offset these savings. Additionally, increasing technical, operational, and administrative costs at UNOG further exacerbate the situation.

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ee further details on the dedicated webpage : <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/13th-baltic-sea-subregional-meeting-under-convention-environmental>

<sup>7</sup> Namely Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, Poland and Sweden

<sup>8</sup> See further details on the dedicated webpage: <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/first-subregional-meeting-environmental-assessments-transboundary>

<sup>9</sup> Namely Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Libya, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Tunisia, Türkiye

### **C. Objectives and planned activities**

60. The ninth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention, resumed, and the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, resumed, will be organized on 10 December 2024 in Geneva.

## **V. Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (Protocol on PRTRs)**

### **A. Overview of recent developments**

61. Due to their cross-cutting nature and wide substantive scopes, the Convention and its Protocol continued supporting Parties' efforts for furthering a number of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16 and also SDGs 3, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17, and well as other international commitments such as, the Pact for the Future, UN Resolution on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, UNFCCC, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Global Framework on Chemicals.

62. The treaties provided solid frameworks, principles and procedures for effective access to information and justice and for the engagement of the public in decision-making related to right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the national, transboundary and international contexts. Such decision-making concerns a wide range of policies, projects, strategies, plans and legal acts. The Convention's activities helped to build the capacities of authorities to apply effective public participation procedures for decision-making related to all of these. The work on access to justice assisted Parties in establishing effective frameworks for access to remedies by the public, thereby reinforcing the rule of law and strong institutions. Furthermore, the activities helped to enhance transparency and public participation in international decision-making. The Convention and the Protocol also enabled Governments to establish coordinated reporting systems on the release of hazardous chemical substances and to promote easy online access to them and other environmental information. It facilitated early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks. The work saw strong engagement and leadership of Parties in pursuing activities and active participation of non-governmental organizations, academia and other stakeholders.

63. Support to countries was provided by developing recommendations, guidance material and electronic information tools, such as the Aarhus Clearinghouse and PRTR.net, and through advisory services to Governments and international organizations. The treaties also provided platforms for sharing knowledge and expertise to build countries' capacities for the attainment of the Goals. Dialogue was fostered among authorities, technical experts, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders by organizing meetings of subsidiary bodies and capacity building events.

64. 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. The secretariat also supported organization of the International high-level judges conferment on environmental justice to foster collaboration among judicial communities in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus in addressing global environmental justice issues (Bishkek, 14-16 September 2023).

65. An international round table "Aarhus Convention: Effective public participation for good governance, healthy environment and sustainable development" was held to assist Uzbekistan in its efforts towards the accession to the Aarhus Convention (Tashkent, 1-2 June 2023); the event provided an opportunity to share experiences in the effective dissemination of environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making at the

national and international levels, access to justice and the functioning of Aarhus Centres in different countries.

66. The Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention held its twenty-seventh meeting (Geneva, 26–28 June 2023) to address a range of pressing issues. Reflecting on the major milestones achieved during 25 years since the Convention’s adoption, Parties to the Convention together with the representatives of international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia and other key stakeholders, such as child and youth defenders, welcomed accession to the Convention of Guinea-Bissau in April 2023 opening new horizons for environmental democracy in Africa and worldwide. A number of commitments were taken, 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. Despite the ongoing war in Ukraine following the invasion by the Russian Federation, Ukraine reported its significant efforts to implement the Convention and the Protocol on PRTRs. In particular, progress has been made in the area of public access to environmental information and its digitalization through the newly created EcoSystem digital platform, which will also include National Pollutant Release and Transfer Register. To promote transparency and public participation in decision-making on environmental matters, the EcoZagroza system for controlling and monitoring the environmental situation was also introduced to provide up-to-date information on environmental damage and on 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 held online in view of the lack of suitable safe shelters.

67. Aarhus Centres, 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. 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 and 18 October 2023), which was also supported by the secretariat, focused on such critical topics as public participation in environmental decision-making, transition towards green economy and sustainable management of chemicals.

68. The Convention’s Task Force on Access to Information (Geneva, 9-10 November 2023), at its meeting featured an international workshop entitled “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.

69. 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.

70. The tenth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs (Geneva, 27–28 November 2023) focused on the need for PRTR databases to become interoperable and integrated with other sources of data; and the role of PRTRs in promoting synergy among different international reporting obligations 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. Delegations also started deliberations on the next session of the Meeting of the Parties. The meeting allowed to further coordination and cooperation with other MEAs and processes dealing with pollution, chemicals and waste, including the recently agreed Global Framework on Chemicals.

71. The Fourth Joint Aarhus Convention and Convention on Biological Diversity Roundtable on Public Awareness, Education, Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice regarding Living Modified Organisms/Genetically Modified Organisms (Geneva, 11–12 December 2023) was held under the auspices of the Aarhus Convention and of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity. The event built countries' capacities through sharing knowledge, experiences and lessons learned regarding these subjects and put forward suggestions for future action at the national and international levels. The meeting featured a training session on procedures and practice on access to justice related to LMOs/GMOs.

72. The Working Group of the Parties to Convention at its twenty-eighth meeting (Geneva, 2-4 July 2024) reviewed implementation of the current work programme and started preparations for the next session of the Meetings of the Parties. Thematic sessions on access to justice and on promoting the Convention's principles in other international forums were also held. The Working Group discussed Ukraine's challenges in implementing the Convention due to the war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, welcoming the country's efforts despite these extraordinary circumstances. Parties urged the promotion of the Aarhus Convention's principles in international forums, including in forums dealing with energy, emerging technologies and in the work of the International Seabed Authority, stressed the need for better protection of environmental defenders, and expressed concern over the lack of financial resources for the Convention's work, calling for increased and sustained financial contributions to meet the secretariat's increased workload and growing demands in particular for work area on compliance.

73. The Convention's<sup>10</sup> and Protocol's<sup>11</sup> Compliance Committees held several meetings during 2023 and 2024. In addition to receiving communications directly from the public, the Committees also provided advice and assistance to Parties. Also, the Convention's Compliance Committee continued to review the progress made by Parties subject to a decision or request of the Convention's Meeting of the Parties concerning those Parties' non-compliance. In this period, the advisory role of both Committees continued to grow. These included: requests from Ukraine to the Convention's Compliance Committee for its advice on how to apply the Convention in the context of the ongoing military aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation and to the Protocol's Compliance Committee, for advice on its legislation on PRTRs. The Convention's Compliance Committee also received requests for advice from Armenia, Czechia and the Netherlands with respect to their

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://unece.org/env/pp/cc>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/public-participation/prtr-compliance-committee>

obligations under the Convention and the Protocol's Compliance Committee provided advice to Estonia, Finland, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia regarding the Protocol's requirements.

74. The Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention<sup>12</sup> undertook a wide range of activities to assist Parties and interested Member States to ensure the safety of environmental defenders. This included in-person visits to a number of countries, the consideration of complaints concerning the persecution, harassment and penalization of environmental defenders, providing input on the development of new instruments and guidance to protect environmental defenders, consultations with vulnerable environmental defenders, speaking engagements, awareness raising and promotional activities and organizing regional consultations for environmental defenders. The Special Rapporteur also issued a number of public statements.

75. The secretariat continued servicing a region-wide inter-agency capacity-building coordination mechanism for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and a global International Coordinating Group on PRTRs to support implementation of the Protocol, and also continued providing inputs to the United Nations Sustainable Development Framework.

## **B. Challenges**

76. The two treaties have a key role to play in ensuring procedural requirements for protecting the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The treaties become a benchmark for many processes and are setting standards for transparency, access to justice and public participation in decision-making, inspiring and helping to promote inclusive participatory approaches to activities in other regions and in other sectors. The work has seen many successes, but also witnessed challenges.

77. The environment is at the very heart of efforts to attain the 2030 Agenda, the Pact for the Future and UN Resolution on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Serious efforts are still required to promote access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters as universal principles guiding action in every context and providing spillover effects on other sectors.

78. Long-lasting and potentially irreversible effects of armed conflicts, such as war against Ukraine, resulting in the deaths, wounding or displacement of many people, greatly harm the environment and the ability of members of the public to exercise their rights to access to information, participate in decision making, and access to justice, with persons in vulnerable situations being particularly exposed to such effects.

79. Given the cross-cutting procedural nature of the Convention and the Protocol, there is a crucial need to foster effective interministerial and intra-ministerial cooperation mechanisms and to use such mechanisms to promote the treaties' obligations as to implement them effectively.

80. Ensuring continuous political support to effective and inclusive engagement of the public in decision-making remains a challenge across the region and beyond.

81. The increase in the penalization, persecution and harassment of environmental defenders around the world, including in the ECE region, has been alarming.

82. Substantial increase of the caseload and its complexity under the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee and a rapid grow of requests to the Committee and to the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, including with regard to advisory support and

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://unece.org/env/pp/aarhus-convention/special-rapporteur>

capacity-building for Parties, requires the secretariat's greater engagement in terms of legal skills and time allocation which poses substantial pressure on its limited human resources.

83. Development of integrated PRTRs, which would allow PRTR data to be more useful for different stakeholders and for supporting informed decision-making for diverse purposes, such as pollution prevention, impact assessment, sustainability and the circular approach to economy, entails additional efforts by Parties and interested Member States.

84. A high demand for promoting synergy and cooperation with relevant organizations and growing number of requests to the secretariat for advice from other international forums and organizations, do not match the secretariat's capacity to respond to such call.

85. Partner organizations played a significant role in capacity-building at the national, local and subregional levels. Aarhus Centres, where established, can serve as a platform to promote multi-stakeholder dialogue on Sustainable Development Goals and other relevant issues. Ensuring the sustainability of these Centres remains crucially important.

86. Lack of engagement of authorities responsible for development assistance and technical cooperation poses barriers for the possibility of integrating the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol in these programmes as cross-cutting instruments supporting attainment of Sustainable Development Goals, promoting human rights and achieving environmental justice.

### **C. Objectives and planned activities**

87. In 2024-2025 the secretariat will: (a) continue to support Parties in the successful implementation of the Convention's and Protocol's provisions; (b) assist Parties in preparing documents to be considered at the eighth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs in late autumn 2025; (c) undertake substantive and practical preparation for and organization of the sessions; (d) continue to raise awareness among Parties on the lack of financial resources in the secretariat to adequately support the implementation of the Convention and Protocol work programmes; (e) continue to promote the Convention and its Protocol to interested Member States encouraging their accession to the treaties; and (f) continue promoting cooperation with other relevant MEAs, organizations and processes as to assist Parties and other interested Member States to implement their different international commitments in synergy.

88. The Task Force on Access to Information will hold its ninth meeting (Geneva, 7-8 November 2024) to consider experience in advancing effective access to information as to assist Parties and interested Member States in this area. In particular, participants are expected to discuss: (a) implementation of the updated Recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools (ECE/MP.PP/2021/2/Add.2) adopted by the Meeting of the Parties at its seventh session; (b) the use of modern technologies by the public for assembling, exchanging and using environmental data and information; (c) public access to information related to transparency of public authorities on environmental matters; (d) the application of restrictions on access to information; and (e) the protection of whistle-blowers and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the provisions of the Aarhus Convention.

89. The eleventh meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers will take place back-to-back with the fourth Global Round Table on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (Geneva, 20-22 November 2024). Both events are aimed at strengthening capacities of Parties and other interested Member States to develop or improve their PRTR systems. The Working Group of the Parties will focus on preparations for the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties, scheduled for late autumn

2025. The Round Table will be organized jointly with OECD and in cooperation with UNITAR and UNEP.

90. The Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making will hold its eleventh meeting (Geneva, 12-13 December 2024) to consider policies and practical measures to assist Parties and interested Member States in effective implementation of the second pillar of the Aarhus Convention. Discussions during the meeting will focus on: (a) effective participation in decision-making of groups in vulnerable situations and (b) public participation in decision-making in a transboundary context. Thematic discussions will address public participation in decision-making related to agriculture and fishery; oceans, seas, and marine resources; and emerging technologies.

91. The Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention in 2025 will review implementation of the current work programme and continue preparations for the eighth session of the Meetings of the Parties, scheduled for late autumn 2025. Thematic sessions on genetically modified organisms and on promoting the Convention's principles in other international forums will also be held.

92. Compliance Committees under the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs will hold several meetings aimed to assist Parties in improving their compliance with these treaties, to provide advice as well as to prepare findings and recommendations for consideration by the upcoming sessions of the Meetings of the Parties of both instruments.

93. The eighth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs are planned to take place in late autumn 2025. A number of decisions and a declaration addressing the role of the treaties in tackling the Triple Planetary Crisis are expected to be adopted by these bodies.



## VI. Conclusions

94. MEAs are playing an important role in assisting Member States in fostering attainment of the 2030 Agenda, the Pact for the Future, UN Resolution on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and other international commitments related to e.g., climate change, human rights, disaster risks, pollution, transboundary cooperation, water management, green energy transition, biodiversity, circular economy and resilient development. MEAs are well placed to support the postwar reconstruction in Ukraine through e.g., promoting sustainable plans and projects and ensuring transparency, rule of law and public participation.

95. The treaties also provided examples for setting standards and contributed expertise to various relevant processes within the region and beyond. The work has seen many successes, but also witnessed challenges. The below list contains issues of common concern for MEAs:

- (a) Greater support required for promoting of ECE MEAs across the ECE region and beyond.
- (b) Need to strengthen inter- and intra-ministerial coordination, cooperation with local authorities, industry, and other sectors and stakeholders as to support effective implementation of MEAs.
- (c) More efforts required to promote awareness of the MEA knowledge products (Guidelines, Recommendations, Good Practice compilations, information repositories, videos etc.) beyond nominated national competent authorities and stakeholders actively involved in MEAs work within and beyond the ECE region.
- (d) Need to improve awareness and support of UN Country Teams for assisting countries in the treaties' implementation on the ground across the region and beyond.
- (e) Uneven engagement by Parties contributing to the sustainable funding of activities of the work programmes adopted by their respective Meetings or Conferences of the Parties.
- (f) A continuous low level and irregularity of the financial contributions impacts the implementation of the treaties' work programmes and the predictability of planning for conducting the MEAs' activities.
- (g) The substantial increase by UNOG of technical, other operational and support costs for the provision of administrative services aggravated the financial situation.
- (h) Termination of provision of online or hybrid meeting services by UNOG<sup>13</sup>, coupled with lack of funds for travel of experts in Member States and organizations, led to inadequate representation of experiences from different regions and entities at meetings requiring expert inputs.

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<sup>13</sup> After considering the relevant elements presented in the report of the Secretary General entitled *Pattern of Conferences (A/78/96)*, the General Assembly did not establish a mandate or provide required guidance on rules of procedures, conditions of service for interpreters, security, authentication and universal access for the continuation of provision of online or hybrid meeting services. In the absence of such a mandate and legislative framework, hybrid and virtual meeting services were no longer being provided by the United Nations Office at Geneva through regular budgetary funds effective 22 January 2024. At the same time, these services, be requested in exceptional circumstances, could be covered through extrabudgetary contributions. However, as of 8 October 2024 such exceptions were no longer granted.