



## Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

### THE SECRETARIAT

#### Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities

### CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORT OF AARHUS CONVENTION

#### A. GENERAL

The OSCE, since 1999, has been working closely with the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat in promoting ratification and implementation of this Convention by its participating States through organizing awareness raising campaigns, national and regional seminars and supporting the establishment, functioning and growth of environmental NGOs.

The *OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension* adopted at the 2003 Maastricht Ministerial Council addresses specifically the importance of processes and institutions for providing timely information about issues of public interest in the economic and environmental field to the civil society and citizens as well as to the media and business community. Through the Strategy Document, the OSCE is committed to promoting public participation in sustainable development policy formulation and implementation which in turn requires a well-informed and responsive dialogue between citizens and the governments.

The *Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security* adopted at the 2007 Madrid Ministerial Council also reaffirmed the importance of good environmental governance and underlined the importance of raising awareness on the potential impact on security of environmental challenges.

The *Economic and Environmental Forums* that are organized since 1993 annually by the OSCE at the highest level have also addressed the challenges associated with public participation and access to information within the framework of various economic and environmental issues linked to security.

It is within this overall framework that, since 2002, OSCE has been supporting the establishment of Aarhus Centres and Public Environmental Information Centres (PEICs) in several countries, including Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Some of these Centres are supported by the Environment and Security – ENVSEC Initiative, a partnership between OSCE, UNEP, UNDP, UNECE, REC, as well as NATO as an associate partner.

#### Aarhus Centres/PEICs

<b>Albania</b>	: Tirana, Shkodra and Vlora
<b>Armenia</b>	: Yerevan, Vanadzor, Idjevan, Dilijan, Goris, Kapan, Gavar, Hradzan, Gumri
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	: Baku, Ganja, Gazakh
<b>Belarus</b>	: Minsk
<b>Georgia</b>	: Tbilisi
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	: Osh
<b>Tajikistan</b>	: Dushanbe, Khujand

The Aarhus Centres have been instrumental in providing a forum for government officials from Ministries of Environment to meet with members of environmental NGOs to build co-operative approaches in order to tackle environmental issues. These Centres mostly serve towards the objectives within the context of the “information pillar” of the Aarhus Convention, although in some countries activities performed by the Centres have also included assistance to the citizens to participate in environmental decision making and, to a lesser extent, related to access to justice.

The Aarhus Centres are usually based on an agreement between the relevant OSCE field operation and the Ministry for Environment in the respective country and managed by a board consisting of an equal number of representatives from government and civil society.

In this initiative, the OSCE partners primarily with the Governments of the participating States where these Centres are located as well as the leading environmental NGOs in these countries. UNEP, UNDP, UNECE, REC and NATO are the natural partners to the OSCE through their involvement in the ENVSEC Initiative. Governments of Belgium, Canada, Spain, Sweden and United States of America have provided significant contributions to the establishment and operation of these Centres.

## B. CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVES

Aarhus Convention related portfolio of projects supported by the OSCE, encompassing currently seven countries, reflects a decentralized and enabling approach, based upon cooperation and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental agencies. Aarhus Centres / PEICs in many of these countries have enabled the development of a new model and understanding whereby public institutions, local/regional administrations and non-governmental organizations jointly address the environmental challenges in their localities and seek solutions. The overarching goal of this emerging model would be that well-informed citizens represented through civil society organizations have the necessary capacity and power to influence local and, collectively, national environmental policies and decisions. Aarhus Centres / PEICs have proved to be highly instrumental in providing local stakeholders with tools to achieve this goal. These Centres have already demonstrated potential in integrating the concept of sustainable development in the everyday lives of local communities. Displaying numerous strengths to be built upon and weaknesses to be overcome, the main capacity building components of the OSCE supported Aarhus Centres / PEICs are delineated below.

### B.1. Raising awareness on Aarhus Convention and environmental issues in general:

A number of trainings and other awareness-raising activities have been organized by all Aarhus Centres / PEICs for government representatives, civil society representatives as well as, in some countries such as Albania, for private sector representatives on Aarhus Convention in general and their respective rights and obligations as per the Convention. A variety of events in the form of seminars, campaigns, etc. have also been organized in some countries to promote Convention principles among different target groups such as women, youth, and children.

#### Highlights from Aarhus Centres on “awareness raising”:

##### **Albania:**

- Presentations were organized on Aarhus Convention for university students in Shkodra region.
- UNECE booklets on Aarhus Convention were translated into Albanian and 1500 copies were distributed by the Aarhus Centres.

##### **Armenia:**

- Aarhus Centres are focal points for implementing Aarhus Convention principles. Centres disseminate all the information pertaining to the Convention and its implementation through various means including its website as well as a series of seminars and round tables.

##### **Azerbaijan:**

- Trainings have been organized on Aarhus Convention, targeting government representatives and NGOs in Ganja.

**Belarus:**

- Through joint partnership of OSCE Office in Minsk and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources, the National Environmental Information Centre has actively promoted the Convention, has responded to requests for information and provided legal consultations upon request.

**Georgia:**

- An information booklet on Aarhus Convention was published and distributed widely
- A competition was organized for school children on protected areas of Georgia (photos, paintings, essays)

**Kyrgyzstan:**

- Aarhus Centre in Osh has invested significant efforts in raising awareness on rights and obligations brought by the Aarhus Convention. Five trainings have been organized specifically on the Convention.
- The Centre has become the meeting venue for local NGOs to discuss environmental problems and seek solutions as well as a venue to build their working relationship with government as well as international organizations. These efforts led to the creation of Advocacy Coalition of NGOs representing currently 25 NGOs.
- Youth are also among the primary target groups of the Centre in promoting environmental awareness within the local communities.

**B.2. Facilitating general implementation of Aarhus Convention:**

While there is still room for further improvement, in most of the countries, managers of Aarhus Centres / PEICs, or their equivalents, work in close cooperation with Aarhus Convention National Focal Points. This not only facilitates the implementation of the Convention but also contributes to the strengthening of partnerships between governmental and non-governmental sectors.

The Regional Aarhus/Public Environmental Information Centres' Meeting organized in October 2006 by the OSCE in Gudauri, Georgia brought together all the Managers of the Aarhus Centres as well as the representatives of OSCE offices in respective countries. Participation of the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat has also contributed significantly to a better understanding on the role of Aarhus Centres in the effective implementation of the Convention.

**Highlights from Aarhus Centres on “facilitating Convention’s implementation”:****Albania:**

- An Advisory Board was established in Tirana involving representatives of Government and civil society organizations as well as managers of the three Aarhus Centres and the representative of the OSCE Presence in Albania as observer. The Centre hosted 4 Advisory Board meetings in 2007 to review progress and to agree on the work plan.
- Aarhus Centre in Tirana organized and hosted a consultation meeting with civil society organizations regarding Albania's action plan in response to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee's recommendations of August 2007.
- Website : <http://aic.org.al/>

**Armenia:**

- A Council of Experts was set up in each Centre, equally represented by governmental officials and non-governmental experts. By focusing on strengthening civil society, enhancing public awareness and increasing the capacities of local stakeholders, Centres contribute to the implementation of the Convention at local level.
- Website: [www.aarhus.am](http://www.aarhus.am)

**Azerbaijan:**

- A public hearing was organized on the second National Report of Azerbaijan on Aarhus Convention.
- Website: [www.aarhuscenter.az](http://www.aarhuscenter.az)

**Georgia:**

- A legislative and institutional analysis was conducted on implementation of Aarhus Convention in Georgia on the issues connected to access to environmental information, public participation in

environmental decision making and access to justice. The aim of this review was to provide a brief introduction to the judicial implementation of the Aarhus Convention; to identify main overlaps and contradictions between the national legislation and Aarhus Convention; and provide recommendations for revisions in national legislation. The results of the study were discussed in detail by various stakeholders through two roundtables.

- Website: <http://aarhus.dsl.ge>

**Kyrgyzstan:**

- Aarhus Centre has organized four meetings to discuss and elaborate further the National Report on Implementation of the Aarhus Convention with the participation of government representatives and local NGOs.

**Tajikistan:**

- Review and assessment of relevant legislation and policy documents were conducted by the Aarhus Centre in Dushanbe in order to assist the government in ensuring their compliance with the Aarhus Convention.
- Website: [www.aarhus.tj](http://www.aarhus.tj)

### B.3. Access to information:

One of the major achievements of the OSCE's Aarhus initiative has been the allocation, by most of the governmental authorities (central and local), of premises to serve as Aarhus Centres / PEICs. These centres accommodate meetings and other activities of local stakeholders and serve as local centres of information and communication.

Common to almost all Aarhus Centres / PEICs, is the supply of free access to computers and internet as well as environmental publications for people visiting these centres.

Periodic newsletters and Aarhus Centre websites contribute significantly to increased awareness of local stakeholders on environmental issues in their localities; local and national environmental policies and legislation as well as issues related to implementation of Aarhus Convention.

A number of thematic meetings, workshops and roundtables have enabled national and local stakeholders to come together and provide their respective perspectives and approaches to various environmental issues.

Journalists and media have also been among the primary target groups of most of the Aarhus Centres / PEICs in promoting the first pillar of the Aarhus Convention.

#### Highlights from Aarhus Centres on "access to information":

**Albania:**

- Aarhus Centres hosted a number of workshops and roundtables on priority local environmental problems such as the roundtable on waste disposal issues in Vlora with participation of local authorities and local community representatives; or the workshop on waste management in Velipoja municipality following the 2007 tourism season.

**Armenia:**

- Within the nine Aarhus Centres operating in Armenia, a total of 327 events were organized in 2007 in the form of seminars, round tables, public hearings and discussions with the participation of close to 7,000 people.

**Azerbaijan:**

- Trainings on eco-journalism have been organized in Aarhus Centres of Baku and Ganja which had significant coverage in the local and national media.

**Georgia:**

- Three guidelines were developed and publicized through the Centre's website. These are: Guidelines on how to request and receive information from the Ministry of Environment Protection

and Natural Resources of Georgia (prepared based on Aarhus Convention and Administrative Code of Georgia); Guidelines on how to receive license from the Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources of Georgia for utilization of natural resources (prepared based on national legislation of Georgia); and Legal guidelines for receiving environmental impact permit from the Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources of Georgia.

- The Aarhus Centre hosted 45 training sessions, seminars and conferences in 2007 with participation of over 800 participants in total.
- A total of 18 environmental radio programs in Georgian and 2 environmental radio stories broadcasted under the Centre Environmental Radio Campaign

**Kyrgyzstan:**

- The Aarhus Centre in Osh hosted over 2000 visitors in 2007 and provided information and consultative services.
- Three information boards were established in Osh, Batken and Jalalabat provinces to provide information on Aarhus Convention and on activities of local governments and NGOs in the environment field.
- A number of meetings and seminars were organized to promote environmental journalism.
- Aarhus Centre has supported development and broadcasting of five video films on Aarhus Convention, illegal cutting of forests, water pollution, industrial and uranium waste sites and disaster preparedness.

**Tajikistan:**

- Over 700 people visited the Aarhus Centre in 2007 and benefited from its services.
- A competition on Environmental Journalism was organized among journalists in Sughd Region to encourage increased and correct coverage of environmental issues by the media. 50 applications were received and 20 were awarded.
- Environmental Cinema week organized in Sughd region attracted more than 3,000 people to view various environmental documentaries and feature movies.

**B.4. Public participation:**

Public hearings have been the primary mechanisms utilized by most of the Aarhus Centres in promoting public participation pillar. Centres are actively involved in public hearings for planned projects either through strengthening local/national capacities on how to organize public hearings, or through organizing them, or both.

**Highlights from Aarhus Centres on “public participation”:**

**Albania:**

- Civil society network was supported to ensure their contribution towards production of 2007 National Progress Report for Aarhus Convention.

**Armenia:**

- Centres organize public hearings on a number of projects in close cooperation with the Ministry of Nature Protection and provide feedback to the Ministry on the outcomes of the public hearings.

**Georgia:**

- 30 EIA public hearings were monitored and reports and recommendations were provided by the Centre to the Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources in addition to a number of round tables organized for this purpose.
- The Centre prepared and published special guidelines/suggestions for investors on the scope and procedures of organizing a public hearing.

**Kyrgyzstan:**

- A number of trainings have been organized by the Aarhus Centre on how to organize public hearings. These were followed by three public hearings: for a gold mining project in Chatkal district of Jalalabat province; construction of a cement factory in Kyzyl Kiya; and waste management in Tashkomur.
- Centre has also organized a number of trainings on “Solving ecological problems through advocacy” in locations that are faced with serious environmental problems.

**Tajikistan:**

- Aarhus Centre has facilitated the process for formulation of local environmental strategy and action

- plan for the city of Taboshar with participation of all local stakeholders.
- It also provided the platform for in-depth discussion on selected hot-spots within the region such as air pollution and radiation, management of solid wastes and consequences of climate change.

#### B.5. Access to justice:

Initiatives in support of “access to justice” remain to be a challenge both in terms of scope and quantity. Through the Aarhus Centres, the OSCE aims to ensure increased focus on activities that promote the implementation of third pillar of the Convention. *The High-Level Judicial Workshop on Access to Justice in Environmental Matters for the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus Region* organized in Kiev in June 2007 by the UNECE in cooperation with the OSCE has been highly instrumental in this respect. The main objectives of the workshop were to increase awareness of the Convention among members of the judiciary and to enable them to exercise their discretion in a way that promotes effective implementation of article 9 of the Convention. The workshop was attended by the senior members of the judiciary from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as well as by international experts.

#### Highlights from Aarhus Centres on ‘access to justice’:

##### **Armenia:**

- In cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, Aarhus Centres have organized a series of seminars on the third pillar of the Convention with the participation of judges and prosecutors as well as government representatives, NGOs and business community.

##### **Georgia:**

- An information booklet on Aarhus Convention for Judges has been published in Georgian and Russian and widely distributed.
- The Centre has started to assist the Tbilisi State University for curricula development and development of educational materials in support of the International Environmental Law Program.

##### **Kyrgyzstan:**

- Aarhus Centre organized two trainings on Aarhus Convention for lawyers, judges and prosecutors mainly from south Kyrgyzstan.

##### **Tajikistan:**

- Aarhus Centre in Dushanbe is planning to organize a seminar in July 2008 for judges, prosecutors, lawyers and legal experts.

#### B.6. Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs)

The OSCE, through ENVSEC Initiative, supported the organization of a workshop in Armenia to provide guidance on national implementation of the PRTRs. Hosted by the Armenian Ministry of Environment in Yerevan in November 2007, the workshop brought together national and international experts as well as the representatives of the Aarhus Convention Secretariat. It has been highly instrumental in exchange of experience among Armenia National Focal Points to the regional and global Multilateral Environmental Agreements, such as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants and Basel Convention, which are expected to benefit from the institution of a national PRTR system.

Aarhus Centre in Dushanbe has also hosted in September 2007 a PRTR Seminar for the governmental organizations, Regional State Committees on Environmental Protection and environmental NGOs.

## C. PRIORITIES, NEEDS AND LESSONS LEARNED

In general it can be concluded that:

- Capacity building remains to be one of the main challenges for implementation of the Aarhus Convention at national and local levels.
- Aarhus Centres offer the means and mechanisms for a productive cooperation between government agencies, NGOs and international organizations.
- In addition to the Ministries of Environment, it is important to cooperate with other line ministries and governmental bodies such as Ministries of Energy, Public Works, Industry, etc. within the framework of Aarhus Centres.
- Further efforts are needed to strengthen the technical and administrative capacities of NGOs as well as to provide them with the means to work together.
- A holistic approach is more beneficial in addressing capacity needs for Multilateral Environmental Agreements rather than an isolated approach. Along those lines, there is a need to further focus on strengthening national and local capacities for environmental impact assessments and work more closely with the private sector.
- It is important to create opportunities for learning from each other among different Aarhus Centres in different countries. Various means, including organizing information-exchange programmes, mutual site visits, study tours could be effective ways of learning from each other.
- Support to small scale demonstration projects as identified by Aarhus Centres could be an effective means not only to address some of the priority local environmental issues but also to increase the commitment of local stakeholders to the process, binding them together around concrete areas of joint action.
- The overall process itself is very valuable in terms of involving local stakeholders, bringing them together and providing them with the necessary means to work together.

To address above issues and many others, the OSCE will conduct an *Independent Evaluation* of the Aarhus Centres / PEICs. Overall objective of the evaluation exercise is to generate knowledge from the experiences of the Aarhus Centres within the context of OSCE's efforts to raise awareness on environmental issues as well as promoting participatory approaches in environmental decision-making. Results of the Evaluation will be used not only for programming purposes by the OSCE, but also as a policy advocacy tool for the OSCE and its partners to promote ratification and implementation of the Aarhus Convention. In addition to this broader scope, this evaluation will be a lesson learning and forward looking exercise rather than purely an assessment of past results. It will aim to present information about the nature, extent and where possible the effect of the Aarhus Centres' activities in addressing the challenges associated with the three pillars of the Convention.