

Executive Secretary



Executive Secretary holds Townhall meeting

On 8 June 2012, exactly two months after taking his duties, Executive Secretary Sven Alkalaj hosted his first Townhall meeting to introduce himself to all staff members and share his first impressions. In his first remarks, he said that UNECE "has an important place and even a leading role among regional organizations and the UN system as a whole" and stressed "how UNECE's programmes of work and products have a real and practical impact on people's lives".

Referring to the current review of UNECE's mandate by member States, he said that he would apply all his diplomatic skills and experience to ensure a positive outcome that will meet the needs of member States while enabling the secretariat to have the resources to pursue its mission.

As to the Compact, namely the agreement with the Secretary-General regarding areas of focus of the Organization for 2012, Mr. Alkalaj mentioned three points:

- Sustainable development initiatives outlined in the SG's Five Year Action Plan
- Effective follow-up to the Rio +20 outcomes related to green economy
- Implementation of the Sustainable Energy for all initiative.

Related objectives will be reflected in the work plans and performance assessment of UNECE staff at all levels.

The Executive Secretary then addressed three areas of special attention where initiatives have already been taken:

- **The development of a communication strategy to increase the visibility of UNECE** - A dedicated Task Force has been set up and various activities have already been launched. These include sending a questionnaire to UNECE members States' missions in Geneva to gather their opinion about ways to improve the effectiveness of UNECE communication.
- **Publications Policy** - A new directive on the procedure for submitting publications has been adopted with a view to ensuring the effective implementation of UNECE's Publications Programme, while reducing the number of publications, in particular hard copies, the expenditures related to publishing and its impact on the environment. These objectives are in line with the Secretary-General's call on the Organization to move towards climate neutrality and more sustainable management in its operations.
- **Travel Policy** - Some concrete measures have been taken already to minimize travel and increase the use of video-conferencing whenever possible.

Finally, the Executive Secretary underlined the need for increased cooperation between divisions and for ensuring a positive and pleasant work environment, which is conducive to higher staff satisfaction and better results. He said that through an "open-door policy", he intended to take an active role in achieving these objectives. He called for staff's full support in making UNECE "a centre for excellence, recognized in global terms". □

Transport



Executive Secretary attends ITC bureau meeting

UNECE Executive Secretary Sven Alkalaj attended the meeting of the Bureau of the Inland Transport Committee (ITC) on 5 June 2012. The Inland Transport Committee is the centre of inland transport agreements, some of which are global, such as those related to road safety, vehicle regulations, dangerous goods, and border crossing facilitation. In his opening statement, Mr. Alkalaj noted that: "Your work has a direct impact on the daily life of people and businesses and fulfils a real need that is not met by any other international organization".

Mr. Alkalaj also made reference to the issues currently at the top of the transport agenda such as climate change, sustainable development, energy efficiency, global road safety and financing for development, and highlighted the importance of UNECE work in addressing these "major challenges". The Executive Secretary was then invited to sign the UNECE road safety poster, marking his personal commitment to the objectives of the UN Decade of Action for Road Safety (2011-2022) and in support of UNECE's road safety work. The Bureau meeting was also attended by Mr. Zdenko Antesic, Deputy Minister of Sea, Tourism, Transport & Development of Croatia, who also signed the poster.



Aarhus Convention



Photo: Courtesy of OSCE Centre in Astana



Photo: Courtesy of Mr. Heermann

The ITC is the Sectoral Committee and the highest policy-making body of the UNECE for cooperation in the field of inland transport. The Bureau of the ITC is the body responsible for the preparation of the agenda of each ITC session; the identification of principal topics where decisions are needed; the monitoring and coordination of activities in order to avoid duplication with the work of other relevant organizations; and the identification of priorities in the programme of work. □

Implementing the Aarhus Convention today: paving the way for a better environment and improved governance

Drawing on more than 10 years' experience in implementing of the UNECE Aarhus Convention, ways to advance implementation of the Convention in Central Asia were discussed at the subregional meeting held in Almaty on 22 and 23 May 2012. The two-day multi-stakeholder training attracted some 50 participants from the Convention's Parties, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and from countries that have repeatedly expressed their strong interest in the Convention's activities, such as Uzbekistan and Mongolia.

At the heart of the discussion were case studies related to the construction of an incineration plant and a waste treatment installation by private developers. Both were opposed by the public for several reasons, including lack of information concerning the technologies involved and the risk of environmental pollution that could severely impact the environment and human health. Participants evaluated the cases in the light of the Convention's provisions and debated how the Convention could help the authorities, the public and the private sector to resolve those situations.

To better address the needs of different target groups, the meeting featured two parallel workshops, one focusing on the practical implementation of the Convention and the other covering the legal aspects of effective access to justice in environmental matters. Participants benefited from the knowledge imparted by the Chairs of the Convention's Task Force on Access to Justice (led by Sweden) and the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making (led by Ireland); members of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee; representatives of the United Nations Environment Programme, the Association of European Administrative Judges (supported by the German Foundation for International Legal Cooperation) and European ECO Forum; and other international experts in environmental law.

The first workshop addressed the role of, and challenges faced by, Aarhus Centres, non-governmental organizations and governmental officials in the practical implementation of the Convention in the subregion. Participants pointed out that issues of confidentiality of environmental information and intellectual property rights with regard to project design documentation should be made clear. In addition, the role of the developer in ensuring public participation in all stages of decision-making needed to be clarified. The contribution of Aarhus Centres to promoting public input into decision-making and in facilitating access to judicial procedures was also discussed using concrete examples of how these Centres provide a platform for public authorities, the private sector and the public to explore solutions to environmental concerns, how they mediate particular situations, how they assist with and/or lead in organizing public hearings and how they facilitate dissemination of environmental information. The participants also discussed how to strengthen the capacities of these Centres with a view to responding better to local needs.

At the second workshop, senior judges and representatives of judicial training institutions discussed the legal aspects of effective access to justice. It was stressed that although countries have discretion in framing judicial procedures, the final objective of ensuring effective access to justice for the public should not be undermined and further development of legislation should ensure that these procedures meet the requirements of the Convention. In this regard, a special focus should be put on criteria of standing; the right to simultaneously challenge the legality of any decision or act of public authorities and to request injunctive relief against a beneficiary of that decision or act; ensuring the timeliness of the proceedings in the first and second instances; and on eliminating or reducing financial barriers, especially in cases involving pecuniary claims, forensic and other expertise and lack of legal aid. A study on access to justice in countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia provided a solid basis for discussion.

Participants urged the Parties and other stakeholders to continue developing capacities in the implementation of the Convention at the national and local level and to provide more resource materials about the Convention and environmental rights in the national languages.

The meeting was organized jointly by UNECE and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), in close cooperation with the Government and the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan. OSCE also hosted the meeting. The outcomes of the meeting are expected to guide future implementation of the Convention in the countries of the subregion. □

For more information on the meeting, please visit: <http://www.unece.org/centralasianmeeting2012.html> or contact Maryna Yanush at: maryna.yanush@unece.org.