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Meeting of the Parties to the
Convention on Access to Information,
Public Participation in Decision-making and
Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

Working Group of the Parties
(First meeting, 23-24 October 2003)
(Item 5 of the provisional agenda)

**REPORT ON THE FIRST MEETING OF THE TASK FORCE
ON ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS**

1. The first meeting of the Task Force on Electronic Information Tools established by the Meeting of the Parties (decision I/6) was held in Sofia on 23-24 June 2003 at the invitation of the Bulgarian Government.
2. The meeting was attended by experts designated by the Governments of Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Denmark, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Malta, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan, as well as by the Commission of the European Communities.
3. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank were also represented.
4. The following international non-governmental and regional organizations were represented: GRID/Arendal, European ECO Forum, Interactive Health Ecology Access Links (IHEAL) and the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC).
5. The following national non-governmental organizations were represented: BlueLink Network (Bulgaria), StrawberryLink Foundation (Romania) and Young Researchers of Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

6. The meeting was attended also by representatives of the following private sector organizations: EKO DIMeC (Serbia and Montenegro) and Hendrikson & Ko (Estonia), the latter representing the eCommunities Project.

7. The working languages of the meeting were English and Russian.

8. The Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Environment, Ms. Fathme Iliaz, opened the meeting and welcomed the participants to Sofia. She stated that the use of electronic information tools to promote the principles of the Convention – access to information, public participation and access to justice – was one of the main priorities of the Ministry. She expressed the hope that the new Task Force would fulfil the goals outlined in its mandate: to facilitate the sharing of examples of good practice and further document case studies; to contribute to the implementation of capacity-building measures in cooperation with the capacity-building service; and to discuss and draft recommendations on using electronic information tools more effectively to facilitate implementation of the Convention.

I. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

9. The Meeting of the Parties having accepted the offer of Bulgaria to lead the work of the Task Force, the Task Force elected Ms. Kamelia Dikova as its Chair. Having taken the chair, Ms. Dikova reminded the Task Force of the mandate set out in decision I/6, adopted at the first meeting of the Parties, and expressed the hope that the meeting would provide an opportunity to build upon the work accomplished under the auspices of the previous task force.

II. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

10. Having regard to its mandate, the Task Force adopted the following agenda for its work:
1. Election of officers.
 2. Adoption of the agenda.
 3. Objectives and expectations.
 4. Relevant developments and processes.
 5. Sharing and documenting good practices.
 6. Discussion of possible actions annexed to the report of the Arendal workshop.
 7. Implementing capacity-building measures in cooperation with the capacity-building service and the clearing-house mechanism.
 8. Conclusions and next steps.

III. OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS

11. The Chair invited delegations to contribute to a general discussion on the specific objectives and expectations for the meeting. Mr. Johannes Mayer, Chair of the previous task force, reported briefly on the results achieved under its auspices. He reminded delegations of the outcome of the task force's workshop held in Arendal, Norway, 8-9 March 2001, and said that the new task force should build on this work by attempting to reach agreement on the specific

priorities based on the list of possible actions annexed to the workshop's report. The list, which comprised 64 possible actions, had been numbered in order to make it easier to reference specific actions and been circulated before the meeting. Several delegations welcomed the idea of using the list to identify the main priorities and also use the opportunity to think of specific projects that could be implemented as part of capacity-building measures.

IV. RELEVANT DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES

12. The secretariat gave a brief presentation on the latest developments with regard to the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society (<http://www.itu.int/wsis/>), including proposal for a side event on the Aarhus Convention. It was expected that the event would address the implications of using information and communication technologies to promote access to information and facilitate public participation in decision-making in environmental matters. The event would showcase examples of good practice in the use of electronic information tools to promote environmental rights and thus promote the principles of sustainable development and effectively work to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The Chair welcomed the initiative and invited delegations to contribute to the side event and to contact the secretariat with ideas and proposals for the possible involvement of their respective governments or organizations.

13. Ms. Grazia Atanasio (World Bank) delivered a presentation on the use of strategic communication to promote sustainable development. She said that the World Bank had recognized the importance of promoting local ownership, public awareness and consensus-building among different stakeholders to ensure projects were successful. Strategic communication had become an important management approach to increasing public participation in environmental governance and thus contributing to the sustainability of environmental projects. In this sense, proactive outreach and dissemination of information had been seen as an evolution in the development of public information systems, which now used communication strategies to reach as wide an audience as possible. More information was available on <http://www.worldbank.org/developmentcommunications/>.

14. Mr. Gerard Cunningham (UNEP) presented the latest developments in the UNEP.net initiative on access to environmental information. He described the following main elements of the partnership for the delivery of environmental information and data: the global environmental network of the United Nations, the global environmental information portal and the global environmental information system. The information structure of <http://www.unep.net> comprised thematic and regional portals harvesting information from various information services (e.g. ECOLEX, Proteus, GEO data portal). Founded on the basis of UNEP Governing Council decision 20/5, the Environmental Information Service provided authoritative and wide-ranging environmental information to the public.

15. Mr. Nickolai Denisov (GRID-Arendal) reported on the activities of UNEP in promoting environmental information in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (<http://www.grida.no/enrin/index.cfm>). He stated that, as the individual experiences of countries with economies in transition differed, so did the degree of support that they needed to develop environmental information systems. The focus of UNEP/GRID-Arendal's capacity-building

efforts was to provide those States that still required support with a methodology and a forum for information-sharing on integrated environmental assessment and reporting on the state of environment. He also conveyed to the Task Force the practical experiences of his organization in terms of ensuring effective communication with the public and working with the mass media to promote environmental reporting in the region.

V. SHARING AND DOCUMENTING GOOD PRACTICES

16. The meeting provided an opportunity for the sharing of information and experience in the use of electronic information tools and also to stimulate discussion on how to further document and share examples of good practice. Before the meeting, delegations had been invited to submit in writing their responses to a questionnaire on the use of electronic information tools. The following questions had been asked:

1) In your country, which categories of environmental information (according to the Convention's definition in art. 2, para. 3) are available:

- (a) Through the Internet;
- (b) In other electronic forms; and
- (c) Only in non-electronic form?

What concrete steps have been undertaken to ensure that information is available electronically?

2) Is public access to this environmental information provided through the Internet or other electronic means as a matter of practice or is there a legally enforceable right to such access?

3) In which types of environmental decision-making process (in the sense of arts. 6, 7 and 8 of the Convention) may public participation take place electronically?

4) What are the most important challenges and obstacles to the use of electronic tools in your country to provide:

- (a) Better access to environmental information to the public?
- (b) Mechanisms for public participation in environmental decision-making?
- (c) Access to justice?

17. The secretariat had prepared and briefly presented a summary of the main findings on the basis of 14 responses sent by the representatives of both governments and organizations. Among the key points were the following:

(a) The majority of respondents listed the Internet as the most common way of making environmental information available electronically, although in a small number of States information was still predominantly available only in non-electronic form.

(b) In response to question 2, approximately 50% of respondents made reference to relevant national legislation that provided the basis for a legally enforceable right to information, but in only two cases were there laws guaranteeing electronic access to information and requiring public authorities to make information available in electronic form.

(c) In very few cases were existing electronic mechanisms used to promote public participation except to transmit documents and other relevant information. With respect to public participation, in some instances non-electronic input into the decision-making process was given more weight because the use of electronic tools was perceived as an indication of a less serious personal involvement in the process.

(d) Lack of technical and financial resources was often cited as the main obstacle to the use of electronic tools to provide access to information to the public. Other challenges included inadequate availability of environmental information in minority languages, commercial secrecy and over-reliance of public authorities on the Internet to provide access to information without actively disseminating information.

(e) There were few examples of the use of electronic tools to promote access to justice, although in some cases court rulings were made available on the Internet.

18. The Chair asked several delegations to contribute to the discussion by presenting examples of good practice from their countries. The plenary presentations highlighted the use of electronic information tools by both public authorities and NGOs in providing access to environmental information and facilitating public participation in environmental decision-making.

19. The representative of Bulgaria presented a project to establish a national clearing house on biological diversity, funded by the UNEP Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented with assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) country office in Bulgaria. The main goals of the clearing house were promoting scientific and technical cooperation, and developing an effective mechanism for managing information on biodiversity. More information about this project can be found on <http://chm.moew.government.bg>.

20. The representative from Hendrikson & Ko presented the eCommunity Project (<http://www.narvaplan.ee/e-com/>), which promoted sustainable and democratic urban planning through information and communication technologies. In addition, the project promoted e-democracy by using electronic information tools to raise the level of public involvement in the planning and implementation of urban development projects and to enable exchange of information and opinions. The Internet-based system was currently being implemented in the city of Narva, and its main users were public administration officials and the citizens of Narva. The system enabled public participation by encouraging feedback from users and synthesizing the information that fed into the municipal decision-making process.

21. The representative of Malta presented the national Internet-based information system for development planning. The system enabled the public to electronically send comments and provide input into the decision-making process. The interactive mapping resources made it possible to zoom into the actual site plan and find details about proposed activities and the status of planning applications (see also <http://www.mepa.org.mt>).

22. REC presented several examples of good practice in the use of electronic tools for public participation in decision-making in Estonia. Tiger Leap (<http://www.tiigrihype.ee/eng/index.php>), a programme implemented by the Ministry of

Education, aimed at providing Internet connectivity to every school in the country. As a result, it was expected that the new generation of Estonians would be 100% computer-literate. Through a similar project, Look@World, 100,000 Estonians had been taught basic computer skills. 'Today, I Decide' (<http://tom.riik.ee>) was an e-government portal that enabled citizens to submit comments and proposals on new draft legislation and even to propose amendments to existing laws.

23. The representative of Romania presented a new web site with information on the principles of the Aarhus Convention that would soon be launched by the Ministry for the Environment. The project had been supported through the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) for South Eastern Europe's 2.2 Project (Support Developing Strategies for Implementation of the Aarhus Convention in South Eastern Europe). Once it became operational, the web site would provide access to information on the status of implementation of the Convention in Romania and national Aarhus-related activities.

24. The representative of Sweden gave an overview of the EnviroNet (<http://www.svenskamiljonatet.se/miljonat/english/>), a national web portal that comprised data and information on the environment and the environmental work of Swedish governmental agencies, companies and NGOs. The portal, administered by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, did not produce information but made it available to the public by providing links with the web pages of different member organizations.

25. The representative of the United Kingdom presented its environmental information web portal, What's in Your Backyard (http://216.31.193.171/asp/1_introduction.asp), which provided spatial access to a number of data layers and was being further developed to provide a range of information services, such as a property search, which should help citizens to make informed decisions on whether to buy property in a particular area. Electronic access to information was generally provided free of charge, but, in order to ensure respect for intellectual property rights, a clear distinction was made between the right of access to information and the individual's right to use the information in any way he or she chose. The system was expected to go one step further from merely providing electronic access to documents, in that it should enable the real-time "flagging" of the decision-making process to interested parties at the stage when they could still influence its outcome and thereby facilitate public participation. This work would involve partnerships with local community groups and electronic open forums where people would be able to exchange their views with other members of their community.

26. The representatives of BlueLink Network (Bulgaria) and StrawberryNet (Romania) presented an electronic network linking environmental NGOs from South Eastern Europe. The main objective of this project, administered by REC within REReP, was to bring networks together to share information and cooperate on addressing environmental issues. The system consisted of national web sites that offered services such as news and mailing lists, but it also had a training component. The network would in the future become involved in monitoring the status of implementation of the Aarhus Convention in the region and could also become an NGO node in the Convention's information clearing house. (For more information on this project, see http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/).

VI. DISCUSSION OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS ANNEXED TO THE REPORT OF THE ARENDAL WORKSHOP

27. The Chair invited delegations to present their lists of national priorities based on the list of possible actions annexed to the report of the Arendal workshop (CEP/WG.5/2001/4). On the basis of this input, the Task Force identified the following four priority themes that would serve as the basis for taking initiatives at national level and for preparing draft recommendations on using electronic information tools more effectively to provide public access to environmental information:

- (a) The use of information and communication technology to facilitate public participation in environmental matters;
- (b) Establishing information centres in both virtual and physical environments;
- (c) Identifying strategies for active communication and dissemination of information; and
- (d) Addressing legal, financial and technological barriers to Internet access.

There was general agreement that these priority areas should be taken only as a general guidance and that all actions from the annex to the Arendal workshop's report could be taken into consideration in the future.

28. Having summarized the results of this exercise, the Chair noted that further work was needed to determine regional and subregional priorities, since delegations from the same region did not necessarily select the same national-level priorities. The Chair also urged delegations to develop proposals for specific projects that would address issues falling into any of the four priority areas (for details, see para. 37 (b)). The secretariat invited participants to liaise with their colleagues responsible for pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs), pointing out that significant capacity building efforts might be needed in some of the countries which had recently signed the Protocol on PRTR.

VII. IMPLEMENTING CAPACITY BUILDING MEASURES IN COOPERATION WITH THE CAPACITY BUILDING SERVICE AND THE CLEARING HOUSE MECHANISM

29. The delegation of the United Kingdom presented a capacity-building project developed jointly by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and UNEP on encouraging environmental democracy and improving access to environmental information. The project's goal would be to help develop mechanisms to facilitate access to environmental information in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia by using modern information and communication technologies.

30. The Task Force discussed possibilities for twinning arrangements between donor

governments and States that required capacity building in this particular area. Governments interested in such arrangements were encouraged to initiate bilateral discussions with States that had already developed electronic environmental information systems to see whether simplified versions of such systems could be implemented in their countries. Participants also discussed possibilities for the secretariat to establish links with the Greenspider Network (<http://www.ubavie.gv.at/greenspider>), particularly with respect to mobilizing its support for the implementation of EC directive 2003/4/EC and the Convention. There was a possibility for the Convention to become one of the themes of next year's meeting of the Greenspider Network.

31. Some delegations expressed concern about the emphasis that was given to passive access to information and invited the Task Force to consider the use of electronic tools other than the Internet to actively disseminate environmental information to the public.

32. The secretariat introduced an informal discussion paper presenting the proposed structure and modus operandi of the clearing house and raising a number of specific questions related to its development that had been made available in English to the participants in advance of the meeting. The paper outlined the main objectives in setting up a clearing-house mechanism for the Convention and presented the main issues and considerations that required input from the Task Force, such as the scope of information to be made accessible through the clearing house; the languages in which the information would be available; the thematic and regional priorities; and the range of possible services. The focus of the clearing house would be on the meta-level information related to the rights to information, participation and justice, and how these were promoted.

33. It was envisaged that the clearing-house mechanism would not be a centralized database, but that it would consist of a central node and national nodes. The secretariat would assume responsibility for maintaining the central node and links with the national nodes. In addition, it would continue to manage the Convention's web site, which would become an integral part of, and the main gateway to, the clearing house. However, it would be the responsibility of designated national focal points to maintain the national nodes and to regularly send information about relevant developments in national implementation to the secretariat. The national node would generally be a part of the national environmental web site, but it would not be the purpose of the national nodes, or the clearing house, to contain environmental information or even the environmental information being made available in accordance with article 5, paragraph 3.

34. In addition to Governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations as well as educational and research institutions would also be able to provide links and information to the clearing house. It was envisaged that the clearing house would be designed in such a way as to not only provide comprehensive information about the status of implementation in the countries of the UNECE region, but to also accommodate other information relevant to the global, regional and national implementation of issues of principle 10 of the Rio Declaration around the world.

35. GRID-Arendal presented the prototype of the electronic clearing house and gave an overview of technical issues related to its development. The prototype had been developed at the request of the UNECE secretariat and its design should be the basis for the Convention's clearing house. The presentation addressed the issue of optimizing access to relevant content that would

become available through the clearing-house mechanism through links and a search engine. It also addressed the issue of the format in which information should be provided in order to achieve an acceptable degree of uniformity.

36. Delegations were invited to give feedback. Several delegations considered that it would be desirable to develop some basic principles for establishing the national nodes of the clearing house. It was also proposed that the Task Force should develop some guidance for minimum standards for the content of national web sites, including the specific types of information that would need to become available through the clearing house. During the discussion, there was general agreement that, during the pilot phase, the clearing house should provide access to information in English only, with links to documents written in national languages posted on the national web sites. It was agreed that the General Multilingual Environmental Thesaurus (GEMET) could be a useful tool to facilitate searches and that the thesaurus could be expanded to include terminology specifically used in the context of the Convention. Several delegations were of the opinion that users should be further consulted during the project development phase in order to ensure optimal usability and quality of the electronic clearing-house mechanism.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

37. The Task Force's consideration of issues related to the implementation of the Convention resulted in the following preliminary conclusions and suggestions for further work:

(a) A first draft of recommendations on using electronic information tools more effectively to provide public access to environmental information, in particular with a view to promoting the effective implementation of the Convention, would be prepared by a voluntary core group composed of Austria, Bulgaria, GRID-Arendal and IHEAL in consultation with the secretariat;

(b) Delegations were invited to prepare proposals for capacity-building activities in the four priority areas (see para. 28). It was also envisaged that these proposals should be grouped into geographical areas in order to develop separate capacity-building strategies. The secretariat would then endeavour to provide technical support and transfer of expertise to meet such requests via the Aarhus Convention's capacity-building service or through direct contact with donors;

(c) Delegations were invited to send proposals for twinning projects and other arrangements to the European Commission for possible support. The Meeting welcomed the initiative to explore possibilities for cooperation on capacity building between the secretariat and the Greenspider Network;

(d) It was agreed that the secretariat would, together with GRID-Arendal, continue to develop the Convention's clearing-house mechanism and, more specifically, address the technical issues such as the structure, search facility and indexing of data. In addition, the secretariat would prepare a proposal for the minimum common content of national nodes of the clearing house and circulate it in order to receive input from delegations and all interested parties. Feedback could also be sought through the Convention's web site;

(e) It was agreed that the secretariat would prepare a draft report of the meeting and circulate it to all delegations for comments;

(f) Finally, it was provisionally decided that the next meeting of the Task Force would take place on 26-27 January 2004 in Geneva.

38. As no points were raised under any other business, the Chair closed the meeting. She thanked the organizers for their support and all participants for their contributions to the discussions at the meeting, which had been a good start to the work of the Task Force.