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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 to the Convention

Seventh meeting
Geneva, 2–4 May 2007
Item 7 of the provisional agenda
Electronic information tools and the clearinghouse mechanism

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

Prepared by the Bureau

1. The fifth meeting of the Task Force on Electronic Information Tools established by the Meeting of the Parties was held in Geneva on 23–24 November 2006.
2. The meeting was attended by experts designated by the Governments of Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Finland, France, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malta, Moldova, Spain, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, as well as the Commission of the European Community (European Commission).
3. The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) was represented.

4. The following international non-governmental and regional organizations were represented: Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) and European ECO-Forum.
5. In the framework of European ECO-Forum, the following national non-governmental and academic organizations were represented: Association for Sustainable Human Development (Armenia), BIOSFERA (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), BlueLink Information Network (Bulgaria), CARNet (Kyrgyzstan), Eco-Pravo-Kyiv Environmental Law NGO (Ukraine), Ecology and Scientific-Technical Progress (Tajikistan), ECO-Trias (Moldova), EKO-NET Center for Electronic Communication (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Greenwomen, Environmental News Agency (Kazakhstan), Hellenic Society for the Preservation of the Environment and the Cultural Heritage (Greece), Sokhumi Branch of Tbilisi State University (Georgia), StrawberryNet (Romania), Tashkent Information Center "Environment" (Uzbekistan), Ural Ecological Union NGO (Russian Federation), Youth Environmental League of Prydniprovya (MELP) (Ukraine) and Zeleniy Svit/Friends of the Earth Ukraine (Ukraine).

I. OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ELECTION OF OFFICERS

6. The Chair of the Task Force, Mr. Chris Jarvis (United Kingdom), opened the meeting and welcomed the participants to Geneva.
7. The Chair invited nominations for a Vice-Chair for the Task Force. Mr. Antoine Zahra (Malta) was elected Vice-Chair by consensus.

II. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

8. Having regard to its mandate, the Task Force agreed upon the following agenda for its work:
 - (a) Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda
 - (b) Global, regional and national developments and processes relevant to decision II/3
 - (c) Monitoring implementation of decision II/3 of the Meeting of the Parties
 - (d) Aarhus clearinghouse mechanism
 - (e) Capacity-building activities
 - (f) Innovative use of electronic information tools in processes under the Convention
 - (g) Any other business
 - (h) Adoption of the report and close of the meeting

III. GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES RELEVANT TO DECISION II/3

9. The secretariat gave a brief presentation on follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and the implementation of relevant action lines adopted in the

Geneva Plan of Action, in particular action lines C3 “Access to information and knowledge” and C7 “ICT applications (e-government and e-environment)”.¹ United Nations system-wide follow up was being undertaken by the UN Economic and Social Council’s Commission on Science and Technology for Development and the newly established United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS). To track developments and liaise with other United Nations Regional Commissions, UNECE had established an informal ICT Group for Development. A multi-stakeholder Internet Governance Forum (IGF) had also been established to address policy issues related to the information society. The Regional Commissions were jointly planning a side event to the second World Information Society Day (17 May 2007) as part of a weeklong cluster of events in Geneva; this would provide a further opportunity to promote awareness of the Convention’s work in the area of electronic tools.

10. The secretariat informed the Task Force of the Internet discussion forum on the Millennium Development Goals and e-governance being held from 20 November to 4 December 2006 under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

11. BlueLink Information Network (Bulgaria) reported on the workshop “Greening Development through ICT and Civic Engagement”, co-sponsored by the Association for Progressive Communications and UNECE, which had been held in the context of the first Internet Governance Forum in Athens on 31 October 2006. The event had highlighted how the rights guaranteed under the Aarhus Convention supported the engagement of civic associations in decision-making for sustainable development.

12. The European Commission reported on e-government initiatives undertaken by the European Community. A benchmarking study of 20 basic online public services had found that online services targeted to business were more advanced than those targeted to the public. The Commission had developed facilities for online consultation of environment-related permit applications, and it had issued a tender for a study to inventory online resources relevant to the access to justice pillar of the Convention by late 2007.

13. The Chair presented an update of information on the electronic public registers (ePR) project undertaken by the Environment Agency for England and Wales, which aimed to increase public access to environmental information and promote participation in environmental decision-making processes falling under the Agency’s authority. Home page traffic to the Agency’s Public Registers website had grown significantly since efforts to market the service had been undertaken in 2003, making it the Agency’s most popular Web destination by October 2006.² He also presented research into archetypical users (“personas”) of environmental information

¹ <http://www.itu.int/wsis>

² http://www2.environment-agency.gov.uk/epr/?lang=_e

conducted in the United Kingdom which had used voluntary video monitoring of focus group members' reactions to interactive information websites. The Chair also updated the Task Force on the launch by the European Environment Agency of the Neighbourhood Project's online interactive portal showing ozone conditions across Europe in near real time.³

14. The Vice-Chair (Malta) demonstrated the Malta Environment and Planning Authority website, including its access to environmental information and public consultation features.⁴

15. The secretariat informed the Task Force of the upcoming expert consultation on piloting the United Nations Environment Programme's e-learning platform MENTOR,⁵ which was being organized by UNEP as part of the implementation of the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building, scheduled to be held in Washington, D.C. on 13–14 December 2006. It also invited experts to examine the second version of the Access Initiative (TAI) Assessment Toolkit, launched in April 2006 to promote the assessment of national implementation of principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. A Global Findings Site containing a searchable database of TAI assessments had also been launched.⁶

16. CARNet presented its bilingual English/Russian website and reported on the activities of its Digital Network on Environmental and Sustainable Development Practice and Policy in Central Asia and the Neighbouring Regions of Russia.⁷ It introduced a thematic bulletin devoted to accomplishments and challenges in implementing the principles of the Aarhus Convention in Central Asia.⁸ CARNet is supported by UNDP.

17. The Task Force requested that the secretariat provide a summary of the main Internet links presented by topic. These appear in an annex to this report.

18. The Chair noted the strong growth in usage of electronic online consultation tools and thought it very useful to consider how the European Union (EU) benchmarking exercise could be applied to the Task Force's work on monitoring implementation of decision II/3.

IV. MONITORING IMPLEMENTATION OF DECISION II/3 OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES

19. At the request made by the Task Force on Electronic Information Tools at its fourth meeting (7–8 November 2005), the secretariat, in consultation with the Chair of the Task Force, had developed and circulated in October 2006 a questionnaire to national focal points and Task Force members seeking information on the implementation of the recommendations in decision II/3 of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2006/5, para. 40). The information gathered through the questionnaire is intended to inform the Parties of

³ <http://www.eea.europa.eu/maps-ozone-welcome>

⁴ <http://www.mepa.org.mt>

⁵ Marketplace for Environmental Training and On-line Resources.

⁶ <http://research.accessinitiative.org>

⁷ <http://www.caresd.net/index.html?en=1>

the needs, challenges and solutions in the area of e-information, e-participation and e-access to justice by providing a general baseline from which to measure future progress.

20. The secretariat reported to the Task Force on the initial responses to the questionnaire. As of 23 November 2006, the secretariat had received 20 responses: 17 from Member States, one from the European Commission and two from NGOs. Seven responses had been received from Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA), nine from EU Member States and two from South-East European (SEE) countries. Several respondents had indicated to the secretariat that their responses were incomplete and provisional, and that final versions would be submitted in due course.

21. European ECO-Forum provided the secretariat with an informal Russian translation of the questionnaire. The Task Force agreed that the report of the meeting, including the addendum containing the questionnaire, should be submitted to the seventh meeting of the Working Group of the Parties as an addendum to the report of the Task Force meeting (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.3/Add.1), which would facilitate the questionnaire's availability in the three official working languages of the UNECE.

22. The Task Force welcomed the questionnaire and considered that it was a useful tool for assessing the status of implementation of the recommendations in decision II/3. It noted that the information collected through the questionnaire had been provided by either the national focal points or members of the Task Force, and it agreed that in most cases the information covered national-level practices and resources. The information provided by the national focal points should not be interpreted as a statement on all activity carried out by the respective Member States. In the view of the Task Force, assessment of the status of implementation of the recommendations in decision II/3 could be done without conducting a fully comprehensive inventory and without committing the considerable resources that such an inventory would require. It further noted that some questions were slightly ambiguous and should be clarified.

23. Acknowledging that many of the responses to the questionnaire had been of a provisional nature, the Task Force agreed to extend the deadline for responses to 20 December 2006. It requested the secretariat to prepare a draft of a summary report on the responses and to circulate this to members of the Task Force for comment. The secretariat would then finalize the summary in consultation with the Bureau. The Task Force agreed that the summary of the questionnaire responses should be submitted to the Working Group of the Parties (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.3/Add.2). Individual responses would be posted on the website once they had been finalized.

V. AARHUS CLEARINGHOUSE MECHANISM

24. The secretariat reported on the further development of the Aarhus clearinghouse mechanism.⁹ In October 2006, UNECE had awarded a 15,000 USD grant to GRID-Arendal for a

⁹ <http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org>

project to upgrade the Clearinghouse. A Memorandum of Understanding between UNECE and GRID-Arendal had been signed on 21 November 2006 and the upgrade project officially begun.

25. To improve the utility and transparency of resources appearing in the Clearinghouse's Resource Directory, a tool enabling the ranking of accessed resource entries is being implemented as part of the upgrade project. Attributes to the Resource Directory are also being amended to better reflect discrete topics related to capacity-building (i.e. guidance materials, projects and training, funding resources, expert contacts). The Clearinghouse will be officially relaunched in early 2007.

26. The Task Force continued to review the document "Draft Guidance for National Nodes of the Clearinghouse Mechanism" which had been discussed at its fourth meeting (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2006/5/Add.1) and amended following that meeting. The Task Force suggested various amendments to the text to reflect the upgrades to the Clearinghouse being implemented in the upgrade project.

27. The delegation of Belgium reported on the preparation and launch of Belgium's national node of the Aarhus Clearinghouse.¹⁰ The [aarhus.be](http://www.aarhus.be) national portal, developed collaboratively by the country's federal and regional governments, provided basic information on the three pillars of the Convention, its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers and the amendment on public participation in decisions concerning the deliberate release to market of genetically modified organisms. The portal also included information on federal and regional implementation of the Convention, and on current and past public consultations on strategic environmental assessments and plans.

28. The Chair welcomed the very good progress on development of the Aarhus Clearinghouse at the national and regional levels.

VI. CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

29. The REC reported on preparations for the first workshop on capacity-building for the Aarhus clearinghouse mechanism and electronic information tools. The workshop, originally scheduled for 2–3 November 2006 in Szentendre (Hungary) and aimed at experts from South-East European countries, had been postponed due to an insufficient number of registrations from the targeted subregion. This was believed to result from the very short notice given of the workshop due to internal administrative delays in UNECE, rather than indicating an intrinsic lack of interest in such a workshop. The Task Force agreed on the rescheduling of the workshop to 8–9 March 2007 to allow sufficient time for outreach to targeted countries. The secretariat informed the Task Force that a second workshop for EECCA countries, to be held in English and Russian, was planned for mid-2007. A prospectus on the capacity-building workshops had been

¹⁰ <http://www.aarhus.be> (redirects to https://portal.health.fgov.be/portal/page?_pageid=118,8292438&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)

circulated by the secretariat to the Task Force in October 2006 and posted on the Convention's website.¹¹

30. The European Commission reported that the Green Spider Network,¹² the environmental communication network operating in EU Member States, EU accession States, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, had indicated its willingness to participate in the programme of capacity-building workshops being organized in support of the Aarhus clearinghouse mechanism and share good practice in the communication of environmental information with EECCA countries, subject to the resource and linguistic constraints of its English-speaking membership.

VII. INNOVATIVE USE OF ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS IN PROCESSES UNDER THE CONVENTION

31. The secretariat reported that, in order to strengthen analyses of capacity-building needs, gaps and priorities, national implementation reports (NIRs) were being integrated into an interactive database through the Clearinghouse. Under the project, NIRs prepared for the meetings of the Parties would be accessible through an online database facility which could be searched by language, year of publication, country (or set of countries) and selected question(s) corresponding to specific provisions of the Convention. This approach would facilitate the analysis of implementation practices and gaps. The secretariat demonstrated a beta version¹³ of the NIR online database.

32. The Task Force examined the feasibility of further developing the facility and requested the secretariat to test the incorporation of responses to the questionnaire on implementation of decision II/3 ("On Electronic Information Tools and the Clearinghouse Mechanism") which had been circulated in October 2006. An anticipated further step in the development of the online database would facilitate the annual submission of responses to the electronic information tools questionnaire. Experience gained from this exercise could contribute to the future development of an online reporting facility in support of review of compliance with and implementation of the Convention.

33. The Chair welcomed the development of electronic tools supporting processes under the Convention. The Task Force requested the secretariat to further develop the online database

¹¹ Revised in January 2007. See

http://www.unece.org/env/pp/electronictools/documents/ECE_REC_workshop_prospectus_2007.pdf.

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/environment/networks/greenspider/index_en.htm

¹³ "Beta" refers to the stage in software application development when the developer is actively debugging new features.

facility using the responses to the questionnaire on the implementation of decision II/3 and to prepare a demonstration of the facility for the seventh meeting of the Working Group.

VIII. CLOSE OF THE MEETING

34. As no other issues were raised under any other business, the Chair thanked the delegates for their substantial work and the secretariat for its support of the work of the Task Force, and closed the meeting.

Annex**INTERNET LINKS CITED IN THE MEETING REPORT BY TOPIC****A. Global, regional and national developments and processes relevant to decision II/3**

World Summit on the Information Society (International Telecommunication Union)

<http://www.itu.int/wsis>

Your Right to Know: Public Registers (Environment Agency for England and Wales)

http://www2.environment-agency.gov.uk/epr/?!lang=_e

Ozone today – European status (European Environment Agency)

<http://www.eea.europa.eu/maps/ozone/welcome>

Access Initiative Assessment Software (World Resources Institute)

<http://research.accessinitiative.org>

Environment and Sustainable Development in Central Asia and Russia (CARNet)

<http://www.caresd.net/site.html?en=1&id=2273>

Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA)

<http://www.mepa.org.mt>

B. Aarhus Clearinghouse Mechanism

Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy (UNECE)

<http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org>

The Aarhus Convention, a pillar of environmental democracy (Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment, Belgium)

<http://www.aarhus.be>

(redirects to

https://portal.health.fgov.be/portal/page?_pageid=118,8292438&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)

C. Capacity-building activities

UNECE Subregional Workshop: “Capacity-building for the Aarhus Clearinghouse Mechanism and Electronic Information Tools” (UNECE)

http://www.unece.org/env/pp/electronictools/documents/ECE_REC_workshop_prospectus_2007.pdf

Green Spider Network (European Commission)

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/networks/greenspider/index_en.htm
