

## SUMMARY REPORT ON THE ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES ON ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS (DECISION II/3)

Prepared by the secretariat<sup>1</sup>

At its first meeting (Geneva, 7–8 February 2013)<sup>2</sup>, the Aarhus Convention Task Force on Access to Information requested the secretariat in consultation with the Chair to update as necessary and circulate the questionnaire (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.3/Add.1) to collect information regarding the implementation of the recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools to provide public access to environmental information adopted through decision II/3. The secretariat was also requested to report on the results of the survey at the second meeting of the Task Force (Geneva, 16-17 December 2013). These summary report and its accompanying document are based on the responses received to the questionnaire<sup>3</sup> that had been circulated in English and Russian to the national focal points on 1 October 2013 with a deadline of submission by 1 November 2013.

The present report and its accompanying document, prepared at the request of the Task Force, are intended to inform the Parties of the needs, challenges and solutions in the areas of e-information, e-participation and e-access to justice and to provide a baseline from which to measure future progress. It covers, in most cases, national-level practices and resources. The information provided by the national focal points should not be interpreted as a statement on all activities carried out by the respective Parties.

The document aims to facilitate the discussion by the Task Force on Access to Information under item 3 of the provisional agenda (AC/TF.AI-2/Inf.1/Rev.1).

### **I. Introduction**

1. The present summary report has been prepared by the secretariat pursuant to the request of the Task Force at its first meeting (Geneva, 7–8 February 2013).
2. The questionnaire to assess the implementation of the recommendations of the Meeting of the Parties on electronic information tools (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.3/Add.1) (hereinafter – Recommendations) was revised by the secretariat in consultation with the Chair of the Task Force and circulated to the national focal points on 1 October 2013 with a deadline of submission by 1 November 2013.
3. The following Parties responded to the questionnaire: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, European Commission on behalf of the European Union, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Tajikistan, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Ukraine. Of the 23 responses received from Parties, nine were from the

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<sup>1</sup> This document is a preliminary unedited report.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=31447>

<sup>3</sup> Available from <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/aarhus/tfai2.html>

subregion of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia; three were from the subregion of South-Eastern Europe; as well as one from Norway and ten from the European Union (EU), including one from the European Commission on behalf of the European Union.

4. The summary report on the implementation of the Recommendations of the Meeting of the Parties on electronic information tools of 2007 (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2007/L.3/Add.2) (hereinafter – summary report 2007) was also considered for the interpretation of the survey results. However, it should be taken into account that the respondents to the survey in 2007 were different from the respondents to the current survey.

5. The secretariat has also received responses from the Flemish region of Belgium as well as from the non-governmental organizations “Terra-1530” (Republic of Moldova) and International Centre for Environmental Research (Georgia). The reports provided additional perspectives on national implementation of decision II/3, although the summary report focused on the official national responses by the Parties.

## **II. Access to information and communication technologies<sup>4</sup>**

6. Background information on access to information and communication technologies in this chapter is based on the statistics collected by the International Telecommunication Union, which is the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies and the official source for global ICTs statistics.

7. The percentage of households that have Internet at home as well as the percentage of individuals who used computers and mobile phones varies between the Parties to the Convention across all three subregions (i.e. from 93 per cent of households with Internet access in Norway to about 50 per cent in Romania, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan or Belarus and to the lowest in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Armenia) (see graph 1.1 of the accompanying document).

8. Notwithstanding subregional differences, the data clearly indicates an increasing share of individuals having access to Internet in all three subregions over the last 12 years (see graph 1.2 of the accompanying document). The share of fixed (wired) broadband subscriptions across the Parties has been also increased (graph 1.3 of the accompanying document). In many countries, the share of men using the Internet slightly exceeds the share of women doing so (graph 1.4 of the accompanying document).

9. Regarding mobile phone penetration, the data indicates an increasing share of individuals having mobile-cellular subscriptions across the Parties to the Convention over the last 12 years. The percentage of individuals using mobile phones is quite high and amounts to 75 per cent and higher (see graphs 1.1 and 1.5 of the accompanying document).

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<sup>4</sup> This section is prepared on the basis of data provided by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), available from: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

10. It becomes apparent that the share of people using mobiles exceeds the share of Internet users. This can be taken into account when deciding on the best ways to disseminate certain types of environmental information.

### **III. Availability of priority categories of environmental information through Internet**

11. Table 2.1 of the accompanying document shows the information per subregion regarding the availability of specific types of environmental information through the Internet. It also shows whether such information was legally required to be available through the Internet and, if it was not generally available, whether plans to progressively improve access to the information were in place.

12. Compared to the responses in table 1 of the summary report 2007, there is slight progress in providing general or partial availability through the Internet of data such as:

(a) Reports on the state of the environment (article 5 (3) (a) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (i) of the Recommendations);

(b) Texts of legislation, regulations, rules and other legally binding instruments on or relating to the environment (article 5 (3) (b) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (ii) of the Recommendations);

(c) Texts of policies, plans and programmes on or relating to the environment, and environmental agreements (article 5 (3) (c) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (iii) of the Recommendations);

(d) Data on environmentally significant releases and transfers of pollutants, within the scope of the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (article 5 (3) (d) and (9) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (iv) of the Recommendations);

(e) Environmental monitoring data held by or on behalf of public authorities (article 5 (9) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (d) (i) of the Recommendations);

(f) Product information that enables consumers to make informed environmental choices (article 5 (8) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (d) (ii) of the Recommendations);

(g) Good practice information and guidelines on better environmental management (article 5 (6) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (d) (iii) of the Recommendations);

(h) Appropriate metadata or background information to make the methods, processes and standards of data collection transparent to future data users (article 5 (2) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (d) (iv) of the Recommendations);

(i) Meta-information including catalogues of data sources and details of the scope of information held by public authorities and mechanisms for the provision of access to environmental information (article 5 (2) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (d) (v) of the Recommendations).

13. The responses show the increasing availability of environmental impact assessment (EIA) documentation (articles 6 and 5 (3) (d) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (iv) of the Recommendations) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) documentation (articles 7 and 5 (3) (d) of the Convention; para. 9 (c) (iv) of the Recommendations), although the increase of

the availability of SEA documentation as well as the availability of the references to where EIA and SEA documentation can be accessed are lower.

14. Following articles 6 and 5 (3) (d) of the Convention, the accessibility of the conclusions of the state environmental *expertiza*<sup>5</sup> or at least the references to where this documentation can be accessed both at the national, regional and local level should be also ensured by the Parties that apply this instrument. Nevertheless, the responses and the website links provided by the Parties showed that the access to this documentation for projects covered by EIA and other projects requires further improvement to reach full availability.

15. The availability of documentation forming an integral part of any licencing or permitting process (articles 6 and 5 (3) (d) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (vi) of the Recommendations) was also reported to fall short of the accessibility of EIA documentation. Many Parties in all three subregions reported about the accessibility through the Internet of the legislative framework of the licencing and permitting processes as well as documentation which is required to be drawn up or submitted in the context of environmental decision-making processes that are subject of the provisions of article 6 (paragraph 9 (b) of the Recommendations). Nevertheless, the responses and the website links provided by the Parties showed that the accessibility of applications for individual licenses or permits, comments of third parties, draft and final individual licences and attached conditions still remained limited. Only a small number of Parties demonstrated the full availability of this documentation through the Internet. While in some Parties (e.g., Albania and Croatia) the availability is provided by the national authorities only, in others (e.g., Romania and Norway) it is done by the national and local authorities. The accessibility of comments of third parties is lower in comparison (almost half of the respondents indicated that the comments are not available).

16. Almost all respondents reported the use of public notices about all environmental decision-making procedures subject to article 6 through the Internet. These notices can be published on the websites of the national and local public authorities as well as of developers. Public notices about SEA procedures through the Internet was reported by only half of the respondents. Such notices can be found on the websites of the national and local planning authorities.

17. Information on mechanisms related to access to justice within the meaning of the Convention (article 9 (5) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (iv) of the Recommendations) was mostly reported as fully available through the Internet. At the same time, many Parties responded that decisions of courts, and whenever possible of other review bodies, held in electronic form (article 9 (4) of the Convention; paragraph 9 (c) (iv) of the Recommendations) were only partly available through the Internet.

18. The majority of respondents highlighted that (a) reports on the state of the environment, (b) texts of legislation, regulations, rules and other legally binding instruments on or relating to

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<sup>5</sup> The environmental assessment systems in the former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe are largely based on the "State environmental review" or "ecological expertiza" mechanism formally established in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s.

the environment and (c) texts of policies, plans and programmes on or relating to the environment, and environmental agreements, and (d) environmental monitoring data held by or on behalf of public authorities are legally required to be accessible through the Internet. About half of the respondents reported the same regarding (a) EIA and SEA documentation, (b) public notices about all environmental decision-making procedures subject to article 6 and SEA, (c) data on environmentally significant releases and transfers of pollutants, within the scope of the Protocol on PRTRs, (d) final licences and permits and their attached conditions, as well as (e) product information that enables consumers to make informed environmental choices.

19. A limited number of respondents indicated that data on environmentally significant releases and transfers of pollutants, within the scope of the Protocol on PRTRs, and environmental monitoring data held by or on behalf of public authorities, were provided by fully or partially using geo-spatial technologies.

20. While on average about half of the respondents indicated plans for improvements for priority categories of information, less attention was given to the improvement of information on mechanisms related to access to justice and court decisions as well as applications for licences and permits, comments of third parties on draft permits and conditions as well references to where documentation related to environmental decision-making subject to article 6 of the Convention can be accessed.

21. According to almost all respondents, registration or signing-in to websites to get access to the priority category of information were not required.

22. No Parties impose charges for supplying the priority categories of information provided in the Recommendations. Nevertheless, the charges for the Internet access as such may constitute a barrier for access to information for vulnerable groups of society.

#### **IV. Types of electronic information tools used or planned to be used to provide access to environmental information and facilitate public participation in environmental decision-making**

23. Websites of national environmental authorities and general governmental portals are mostly used for dissemination of environmental information in all Parties. Many Parties have established or plan to establish a specialized portal dedicated to access to environmental information. For example, in Spain both the website of the national environmental authority and websites of local entities contain extensive environmental information available electronically for free and with open access, except for some formalities for licenses or permits that require the identification of the applicant and contain some safeguards for enforcing the Act for Protection of Personal Data. E-mails alerts are also often used to disseminate environmental information, and the websites of some public authorities allow subscriptions for e-mail alerts.

24. Websites of local authorities, planning authorities and developers in some countries were indicated as a source to provide documentation relevant to environmental decision-making procedures subject to article 6 of the Convention as well as strategic decision-making relating to the environment.

25. Use of social media tools was mostly reported by all EU Member states and Norway as well as by almost all countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (see graph 3.1 of the accompanying document).
26. Mobile applications are used to provide access to environmental information in 7 EU countries and Norway, while 5 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 1 country from the SEE region plan to develop such applications.
27. Telephone hotlines and faxes are used in all countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia that responded and in 6 EU countries. Public electronic information kiosks were reported in 6 EU Member States, 2 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 1 SEE country.
28. Widgets, SMS services, electronic data accessible through bar-code scanning, electronic data accessible through touch-tone dialing, are not widely used for dissemination of environmental information in all three subregions.
29. The following electronic information tools are reported to be commonly used in the event of any imminent threat to human health or the environment, whether caused by human activities or due to natural causes (article 5 (1) (c) of the Convention) (graph 3.2 of the accompanying document):
- (a) websites of national environmental authorities as reported by all respondents;
  - (b) specialized portals for environmental information (9 EU countries and Norway, 8 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 3 SEE countries);
  - (c) general governmental portal (5 EU countries and Norway, 7 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 2 SEE countries as well as 2 EECCA countries and 1 SEE country plan to use it);
  - (d) social media (9 EU countries and Norway, 8 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 3 SEE countries);
  - (e) telephone hotlines/faxes (5 EU countries, 8 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 1 SEE country);
  - (f) TV teletext (3 EU countries, 5 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 1 SEE country);
  - (e) mobile applications (5 EU countries, 1 country of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 1 SEE country; 4 EECCA countries plan to use mobile applications).
30. Various measures are undertaken by the Parties to ensure the availability of environmental information electronically and interoperability of different sets of information. For example, an environmental information system was launched in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and will be launched in Albania in January 2014. Another example is the establishment of specialized environmental portals, for instance, in Greece. In Spain, a national scheme of interoperability<sup>6</sup> was developed. An Open Government Data scheme was developed in

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<sup>6</sup> Available from

[http://administracionelectronica.gob.es/pae\\_Home/pae\\_Estrategias/pae\\_Interoperabilidad\\_Inicio.html](http://administracionelectronica.gob.es/pae_Home/pae_Estrategias/pae_Interoperabilidad_Inicio.html)

Austria<sup>7</sup>. Improving the websites of national and local environmental authorities by introducing them in a similar structure was pursued by Bulgaria and Romania. The European Commission informed that ten environmental data centres, which provide environmental data, had been established under the auspices of European Environmental Agency, Eurostat and the European Commission Joint Research Center.

31. The importance of building environmental information systems in accordance with national legislation and the European Aquis as well as national and international standards was highlighted. Some respondents from the EU and SEE region mentioned in particular EU Directive 2003/4/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2003 on public access to environmental information<sup>8</sup> and Regulation (EC) No 1367/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 September 2006 on the application of the provisions of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters to Community institutions and bodies<sup>9</sup> as well as Directive 2007/2/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 March 2007 establishing an Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community (INSPIRE)<sup>10</sup>. Standards of Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC) were also mentioned to support interoperability of different datasets of environmental information.<sup>11</sup>

32. More than half of the respondents from all subregions indicated that their Governments will formulate and implement national “e-government” strategies mostly by 2015 and later and/or “open government data” initiatives as well as a broader digital agenda to facilitate the use of information and communication technologies. This is expected to increase the use of electronic tools to facilitate administrative processes and services, including providing environmental information. In Slovakia, for example, a feasibility study for e-Government in the environmental sector was conducted. Norway participates in the Open Government Partnership that has led to the establishment of open electronic public records of documents in central government agencies and entities. Any person may order copies of documents registered in the records free of charge without stating any grounds or his or her name.

33. Many respondents from EU and SEE also mentioned some European forums and platforms working, inter alia, to promote the development and more effective use of electronic information tools such as the shared environmental information system (SEIS)<sup>12</sup>, infrastructure for spatial information (INSPIRE)<sup>13</sup>, the European Earth Observation Programme (Copernicus, previously known as Global Monitoring for Environment and Security)<sup>14</sup> and European Environment Information and Observatio Network (Eionet)<sup>15</sup>. GEO portal<sup>16</sup>, portals CARNet

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<sup>7</sup> Available from <http://www.ref.gv.at/Veroeffentlichte-Informationen.2774.0.html>

<sup>8</sup> Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32003L0004:EN:NOT>

<sup>9</sup> Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32006R1367:EN:NOT>

<sup>10</sup> Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32007L0002:EN:NOT>

<sup>11</sup> More information is available from <http://www.opengeospatial.org/standards>

<sup>12</sup> See <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/seis/>

<sup>13</sup> See <http://inspire.ec.europa.eu/>

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.copernicus.eu/>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.eionet.europa.eu/>

<sup>16</sup> See [http://www.geoportal.org/web/guest/geo\\_home](http://www.geoportal.org/web/guest/geo_home)

“Environment and sustainable development in Central Asia and Russia”<sup>17</sup> and CAWaterinfo<sup>18</sup> were also mentioned.

34. Public participation in environmental decision-making processes (in the sense of articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Convention) is reported increasingly to take place electronically. Some electronic tools are used by the Parties to support these processes. For example, public e-consultations platforms were used by 8 EU countries and Norway, 5 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and 2 SEE countries. Internet discussion forums are used in 4 EU countries and 6 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Some other respondents indicated their plans to use these tools. E-campaigning tools are also used to a limited extent in all three subregions. Public e-committees, e-collaborative environment, e-interviews and e-meetings are less used, although there are plans to start using these tools as well.

35. Many respondents highlighted that electronic tools are mostly used for posting public notices about decision-making procedures and draft legal acts or strategies, plans, programmes and policies relating to the environment as well as for collecting public comments on the posted drafts. To a lesser extent, these tools are used to facilitate public participation in environmental impact assessment and other decision-making procedures on specific activities.

36. Internet inventories of administrative procedures in which the public can take part and the periodic certification of Government publication schemes were also cited.

#### **IV. Identifying public needs and developing capacities to provide access to environmental information and facilitate public participation in environmental decision-making**

37. When asked to identify the main users of environmental information in the country from a table listing the categories Government, Academia/Schools, General Public, NGOs and Private Sector, the majority of respondents indicated that all categories of users were main users.

38. Respondents indicated several methods to identify users’ needs for each category of the above-mentioned users. Most common are identifying the subjects of information requests, the outcomes of meetings, seminars, website surveys, questionnaires and interviews, monitoring of social media posts and forums, expert opinions and cooperation with relevant public authorities and different public and expert networks.

39. Some respondents indicated that no identification of user needs has been conducted.

40. Some respondents highlighted positive experiences in identifying user needs within specific projects aimed at improving particular electronic tools or wider dissemination of environmental information. For instance, Greece had conducted a successful assessment of user

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.caresd.net>

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.cawater-info.net>

needs during the relevant software development projects. The same was done in Serbia during the development of the first national metaregister for environmental information. On the twentieth anniversary of the Report on the state of the environment (SoER) in 2007, the Portuguese Environmental Agency made an assessment, based on a questionnaire, about the use and effectiveness of this tool for collecting and dissemination of environmental information.<sup>19</sup>

41. The public needs in access to environmental information were addressed by the European Commission through the communication “Towards a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS)” (COM(2008) 46 final)<sup>20</sup>, staff working document “EU Shared Environmental Information System Implementation Outlook” (SWD (2013) 18 final)<sup>21</sup>, communication “Improving the delivery of benefits from EU environment measures: building confidence through better knowledge and responsiveness” (COM/2012/095 final).<sup>22</sup>

42. Progress in improving electronic access to environmental information was reportedly being communicated to the public through a variety of media at the national and local level, including the Internet, electronic bulletins and newsletters, the press and press conferences, specialized environmental magazines, CDs and other publications as well as meetings and conferences.

43. Thirteen of twenty-two governments reported that comprehensive environment-related programmes, including specific training programmes linking the use of information technology applications to the promotion of good environmental governance, had been developed and implemented in their countries. The majority of such training efforts had been periodic and state-financed and had targeted the public sector.

44. Only thirty-nine per cent of respondents reported that their country had an Aarhus Clearinghouse national node Web portal in operation in accordance with paragraph 19 of the Recommendations. Only twenty-seven percent of respondents (mainly in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia) reported to have a designated Aarhus Clearinghouse National Node Administrator responsible for collecting, managing and updating the information contained in the national node and for providing the necessary information for the central node of the Convention’s clearinghouse mechanism.

## **V. Challenges and obstacles to the use of electronic information tools to provide access to environmental information and facilitate public participation in environmental decision-making**

45. Several institutional, economic and legal challenges and obstacles to the use of electronic tools to implement the Recommendations were identified as important (see graphs 4.1-4.3 of the accompanying document to this report). Among the institutional challenges mentioned were:

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<sup>19</sup> Available from [http://sniamb.apambiente.pt/docs/REA/REAOT\\_20anos.pdf](http://sniamb.apambiente.pt/docs/REA/REAOT_20anos.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52008DC0046:EN:NOT>

<sup>21</sup> Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52008DC0046:EN:NOT>

<sup>22</sup> Available from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52012DC0095:EN:NOT>

- (a) Poor cooperation with other agencies collecting environmental data, especially in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and SEE countries;
- (b) The limited scope or extent of environmental data collected; and
- (c) Limited standardization of data sets, especially in the SEE countries.

46. Access to the Internet itself was cited by some respondents from countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia as a barrier, including the lack of financial resources, the high cost of online access and the cost and limited availability of equipment. Respondents from EU and countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia also mentioned the lack of technical support and professional networks. No experience to involve public-private partnerships to address these challenges and obstacles was mentioned. In some cases the poor state of the national telecommunications infrastructure were referred to.

47. The lack of clear legislation on public access to environmental information remains a challenge to various extents in all three subregions.

## **V. Conclusions**

48. The responses to the questionnaire demonstrate a broad level of activity at the national level to implement the recommendations contained in decision II/3. Trends in electronic accessibility of environmental information continue to be headed in a positive direction in all subregions. The legal framework to provide public access to environmental information through the Internet has been strengthened but also needs further improvements. No costs and almost no registration or signing-in procedures for users were reported.

49. The implementation of the electronic “access to information” provisions of the Convention is improving, as reflected by, for example, the nearly universal practice of publishing state-of-the-environment reports online. Also the increasing availability of a range of reference documents and data is a positive development. This includes texts of legislation, regulations, rules and other legally binding instruments on or relating to the environment; texts of policies, plans and programmes on or relating to the environment, and environmental agreements; data on environmentally significant releases and transfers of pollutants, within the scope of the Protocol on PRTRs; and environmental monitoring data held by or on behalf of public authorities. The increasing use of geo-spatial technologies when presenting environmental information might facilitate better decision-making in environmental matters and satisfaction of users’ needs.

50. The dissemination of environmental information through the websites of national environmental authorities, the increasing use of general governmental portals for this purpose and the establishment of national specialized web portals dedicated to environmental information remains a relatively strong area of national performance.

51. The status of implementation at the regional (state, provincial) and local levels is less clear, with some regions advancing ahead of national practice while others lag behind. Coordination of different levels of administration responsible for providing environmental

information is sometimes cited as difficult, time-consuming and costly. Nevertheless, assisting regional and local public authorities in better structuring their websites was reported by several respondents as a useful step to improve public access to environmental information at the regional and local level.

52. Further improvement of environmental information is needed for access to documentation forming an integral part of environmental decision-making procedure regarding specific activities, including environmental impact assessment, state environmental *expertiza* as applicable, licences and permits, as well as strategic decision-making, including strategic environmental assessment as applicable.

53. By contrast, implementation of electronic public participation is still under development. Electronic tools are mostly used for posting public notices about decision-making procedures and draft legal and policy documents relating to the environment as well as for collecting public comments on the posted drafts. To a lesser extent, these tools are used to facilitate public participation in environmental impact assessment and other decision-making procedures on specific activities.

54. Specifying the procedures for electronic public participation in environmental decision-making processes (in the sense of articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Convention) would promote transparency and provide useful guidance both to members of the public wishing to use e-participation techniques and to government officers dealing with public consultation.

55. Continuous exchange of experiences regarding the use and development of social media, mobile applications and e-participation tools and platforms could be beneficial for the Parties that plan to use these tools and platform in the future. It will also facilitate the use of new electronic information technologies in collecting and disseminating environmental information.

56. Electronic information on mechanisms related to access to justice was reported by most countries. The majority of EU member States and half of the respondents from countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and SEE countries reported that such information was generally available. At the same time, many Parties responded that decisions of courts, and whenever possible of other review bodies, held in electronic form were only partly available through the Internet.

57. Resource constraints continue to hamper implementation across the region. Countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia cited resources as a challenge more frequently than did EU countries, but they were by no means alone in raising concerns about the cost of implementing electronic access. Some countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia also reported infrastructural constraints.

58. In many countries, the formulation and implementation of national “e-government” strategies and “open government data” initiatives have facilitated the use of electronic tools for access to information, administrative processes and services as well as the participation of the public in environmental decision-making.