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in Decision-making and Access to Justice
in Environmental Matters

Compliance Committee

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Geneva, 11–15 March 2019

Item 9 of the provisional agenda

Communications from members of the public

Findings and recommendations with regard to communication ACCC/C/2014/104 concerning compliance by the Netherlands

Adopted by the Compliance Committee on 4 October 2018


Contents

	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction	2
II. Summary of facts, evidence and issues	3
A. Legal framework.....	3
B. Facts.....	3
C. Domestic remedies and admissibility	6
D. Substantive issues	7
III. Consideration and evaluation by the Committee.....	12
IV. Conclusions and recommendations	17
A. Main findings with regard to non-compliance	17
B. Recommendations.....	18

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I. Introduction

1. On 6 May 2014, Stichting Greenpeace Netherlands (the communicant) submitted a communication to the Compliance Committee under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) alleging a failure by the Netherlands to comply with its obligations under article 6 of the Convention in relation to the design lifetime extension of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant.¹
2. More specifically, the communicant alleges that the Party concerned failed to provide for public participation to the extent required by article 6 prior to its decision to extend the period of operation of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant until 31 December 2033.
3. At its forty-fifth meeting (29 June–2 July 2014), the Committee determined on a preliminary basis that the communication was admissible.
4. Pursuant to paragraph 22 of the annex to decision I/7 of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention, the communication was forwarded to the Party concerned on 3 September 2014. On the same day, the Committee sent questions to the communicant seeking further information.
5. On 19 September 2014, the communicant provided answers to the Committee's questions.
6. On 3 February 2015, the Party concerned provided its response to the communication.
7. On 17 March 2015, the communicant provided comments on the response of the Party concerned.
8. The Committee held a hearing to discuss the substance of the communication at its fiftieth meeting (6–9 October 2015), with the participation of representatives of the communicant and the Party concerned. At the same meeting, the Committee confirmed the admissibility of the communication. During the discussion, the Committee put a number of questions to the Party concerned and invited it to respond in writing after the meeting.
9. On 8 October and 13 November 2015, the Party concerned provided additional information and its replies to the questions posed by the Committee during the hearing.
10. On 20 January 2016, the communicant provided comments on the further information provided by the Party concerned. On 19 February 2016 the Party concerned provided comments on the communicant's comments.
11. On 3 March 2017, the Committee sent further questions to the Party concerned. On 16 March 2017, the Party concerned provided its replies to the questions.
12. On 29 March 2017, the Committee sent a request to the Party concerned to clarify its reply of 16 March 2017. On 6 April 2017 the Party concerned provided its reply thereon.
13. On 11 April 2017, the communicant provided comments on the replies by the Party concerned of 16 March and 6 April 2017.
14. The Committee completed its draft findings through its electronic decision-making procedure on 25 May 2018. In accordance with paragraph 34 of the annex to decision I/7,

¹ Documents concerning this communication, including correspondence between the Committee, the communicant and the Party concerned, are available on a dedicated web page of the Committee's website (<https://www.unece.org/environmental-policy/conventions/public-participation/aarhus-convention/ftwg/envppcc/envppcccom/acccc2014104-netherlands.html>).

the draft findings were then forwarded on the same date to the Party concerned and the communicant, who were both invited to provide comments by 4 July 2018.

15. The communicant and the Party concerned provided comments on the draft findings on 22 June and 3 July 2018 respectively.

16. At its sixty-first meeting (2–6 July 2018), the Committee proceeded to finalize its findings in closed session, taking account of the comments received. The Committee adopted its findings at its virtual meeting on 4 October 2018 and agreed that they should be published as an official pre-session document for its sixty-third meeting. It requested the secretariat to send the findings to the Party concerned and the communicant.

II. Summary of facts, evidence and issues²

A. Legal framework

Public participation in the licensing of nuclear reactors

17. Section 17 of the Nuclear Energy Act states that division 3.4 of the General Administrative Law Act of 4 June 1992³ and division 13.2 of the Environmental Management Act of 13 June 1979 (*Wet milieubeheer*)⁴ apply to the preparation of a decision on a request for a nuclear licence.⁵ Division 3.4 of the General Administrative Law Act establishes the requirements to notify the public concerned on decision-making, the time frames for the public participation procedure and the procedure for the consideration of the comments and views submitted.⁶

B. Facts

The 1973 operating licence and safety report

18. Borssele Nuclear Power Plant is a two-loop Siemens/KWU pressurized water reactor that has been in commercial operation since 1973.⁷ The plant is operated by N.V. Elektriciteits Produktiemaatschappij Zuid-Nederland EPZ (the operator). Licence reference No. 373/1132/EEK was issued on 18 June 1973 for the operation of the plant for an indefinite period under the Nuclear Energy Act.⁸ The licence included a safety report based on a design lifetime for the plant of 40 years.⁹

The 2006 Covenant and 2010 amendment of the Nuclear Energy Act

19. In 1994, the Minister of Economic Affairs of the Party concerned and the electricity producers' cooperative agreed to close the Borssele plant in 2004.¹⁰

20. In 1997, the restriction on the operating time was entered into the operating licence, but in 2000 it was quashed by the Council of State (*Raad van State*), the highest administrative court of the Party concerned.¹¹

² This section summarizes only the main facts, evidence and issues considered to be relevant to the question of compliance, as presented to and considered by the Committee.

³ Party's response to the communication, appendix 4.

⁴ Party's response to the communication, appendix 5.

⁵ Party's response to the communication, para. 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 29, and appendix 4.

⁷ Party's response to the communication, para. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, paras. 8 and 10, and appendix 6, p. 3.

⁹ Party's response to the communication, paras. 10 and 13.

¹⁰ Comments of the Party concerned on communicant's comments, 19 February 2016, annex, p. 1.

21. In 2002, the operator was asked to abide by the 1994 agreement to close Borssele Nuclear Power Plant by 2004. The operator refused that request, asserting that it was not bound by the 1994 agreement. The Government commenced court proceedings to compel the operator to abide by the agreement but the court held in the operator's favour. The Government did not appeal the judgment. In its 2002 coalition agreement, the Government announced that the plant should close in 2013 instead.¹²

22. In 2004, the operator informed the Ministry of Environment that it would not voluntarily agree with the proposed closure in 2013 and stated that it considered that full compensation would be due in case of closure on that date.¹³

23. On 10 January 2006, the State Secretary for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment provided his written opinion to parliament on whether or not Borssele Nuclear Power Plant should be closed at the end of 2013.¹⁴ He annexed to his opinion a detailed analysis entitled "Borssele Nuclear Power Plant after 2013: Consequences of closure or continued operation", which he had commissioned to examine the effects of the closure at the end of 2013 as compared with its continued operation beyond that point.¹⁵

24. On 17 July 2006, the Government concluded the "Covenant Kerncentrale Borssele"¹⁶ (2006 Covenant), an agreement between the Government and the operator to continue the lifespan of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant up to and including 31 December 2033 at the maximum.¹⁷ Under article 3.2 of the Covenant, the plant operator committed to decommission the nuclear power plant on 31 December 2033 at the latest. In accordance with article 3.1, the Government committed during the lifetime of the Covenant to "refrain from initiating international and national legislation and regulations that are intended to close Borssele Nuclear Power Plant before 31 December 2033".¹⁸ Article 10.1 of the Covenant required the Government to give reasonable compensation for the losses suffered and profits lost by the operator if the Government should fail to comply with article 3.1, including but not limited to the additional costs incurred relating to the premature closure of the plant.¹⁹ Pursuant to article 10.4 of the Covenant, the Government would not be obliged to provide any form of compensation if the plant no longer complied with the applicable safety requirements arising from the Nuclear Energy Act and the legislation based on it.²⁰

25. On 1 July 2010, section 15a of the Nuclear Energy Act was amended to read: "To the extent that it covers the release of nuclear energy, the licence granted pursuant to Section 15b for the operation of the Borssele Nuclear Power Plant that was commissioned in 1973 shall be revoked with effect from 31 December 2033."²¹

Previous amendments to the operating licence and safety report of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant

26. Since 1973, the operating licence of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant has been amended several times. In 1994, the licence was revised to include all previous

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 1.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁶ Government Gazette, 17 July 2006, No. 136, p. 29.

¹⁷ Communicant's reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1a, and article 2 (a) of the Covenant.

¹⁸ Communicant's reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1a.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Party's comments on the draft findings, 3 July 2018, para. 5, and communicant's reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1a.

²¹ Party's response to the communication, para. 11, and appendix 2.

modifications and an environmental impact assessment procedure was carried out.²² In 1996, 2004 and 2013, changes to the licence concerning the fuel usage of the plant were introduced, each time with an environmental impact assessment report and public participation.²³ The plant was also required to undergo mandatory 10-year periodic safety evaluations in 1993, 2003 and 2013. The 1993 and 2003 safety reviews, which included public participation, resulted in further amendments to the licence. The 2013 procedure was ongoing at the time the present communication was submitted.²⁴

Amendment to the operating licence to extend the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant

27. On 25 July 2011, the operator wrote to the Ministry for Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation to request confirmation that the amendments to the safety report needed for an extension of the operating time of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant until 2033 did not require an environmental assessment. By letter of 13 September 2011, the Ministry confirmed that no environmental assessment would be needed so long as the application submitted in 2012 did not contain different elements than previously understood.²⁵

28. On 19 September 2012, the operator submitted an application requesting the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele plant in accordance with section 15b of the Nuclear Energy Act.²⁶

29. On 24 October 2012, the Minister of Economic Affairs announced the preliminary decision to grant the extension of the design lifetime in several newspapers and on the Internet. The announcement stated that an advance assessment had determined that the intended activity should not be subject to a compulsory environmental impact assessment because it did not concern an extension to or modification of the design, but rather the formalization of amendments to the safety report, which could not be expected to have any further environmental consequences. The announcement further stated that the relevant documents would be available for inspection on working days for a period of six weeks starting from 25 October 2012. It invited the submission of comments, in writing, by email or orally, before 5 December 2012, provided the website where the dossier for the procedure could be found and announced an evening information session concerning the preliminary decision on 7 November 2012 in Heinkenszand, a town near the Borssele plant.²⁷

30. On 4 December 2012, the communicant wrote to the Minister of Economic Affairs challenging the preliminary decision to grant the lifetime extension.²⁸

31. On 18 March 2013, the Ministry of Economic Affairs issued the decision “Amendment of the Nuclear Energy Act Licence granted to N.V. Elektriciteits-Produktiemaatschappij Zuid-Nederland (NV EPZ) for the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele Nuclear Power Plant”.²⁹

32. On 20 March 2013, the Ministry of Economic Affairs issued a notification announcing the decision. The notification stated that the decision on the extension of the

²² Party’s response to the communication, paras. 12 and 14.

²³ Ibid., paras. 15 and 20.

²⁴ Ibid., paras. 25–26, and additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, para. 1.6.

²⁵ Communicant’s reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1g, and additional information from the Party concerned, 8 October 2015, annex 1.

²⁶ Communicant’s reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1e, p. 1.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁸ Communication, annex 1.

²⁹ Party’s response to the communication, appendix 6.

design life was available for public perusal from 21 March to 2 May 2013. It also stated that interested parties could lodge an appeal with the Council of State until 2 May 2013.³⁰

C. Domestic remedies and admissibility

33. The communicant appealed the 18 March 2013 decision to extend the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant to the Council of State, the highest administrative court of the Party concerned. By decision of 19 February 2014, the court rejected the communicant's claims.³¹ The communicant submits that the available legal procedures were thereby exhausted.³²

34. The Party concerned does not challenge the admissibility of the communication. It does, however, request a deferral.

35. The Party concerned states that, on 19 September 2014, the Implementation Committee under the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) requested it to provide clarification and information regarding the planned extension of the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant and that the Implementation Committee's investigation was ongoing. The Party concerned submits that the inquiry under the Espoo Convention aims to determine whether the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele plant constitutes an activity within the meaning of the Espoo Convention for which a transboundary environmental impact assessment should be carried out. The Party concerned submits that the process of establishing whether the extension of the design lifetime requires the conduct of a transboundary environmental impact assessment under the Espoo Convention is related to the process of establishing whether the extension of the design lifetime is subject to article 6, paragraph 2 (e), of the Aarhus Convention. It refers in that regard to the Committee's joint findings on submission ACCC/S/2004/1 and communication ACCC/C/2004/3, in which the Committee took into account the related process of establishing an inquiry commission under the Espoo Convention aimed at determining whether the activity was likely to have a significant transboundary environmental impact and agreed to consider the question of compliance with the part of article 6, paragraph 2 (e), relating to environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context in the light of the findings of the inquiry procedure being undertaken under the Espoo Convention.³³ The Party concerned accordingly requests the Committee to defer its consideration of the communication until such time as the Implementation Committee under the Espoo Convention has reviewed the issue.³⁴

36. The communicant argues that, unlike the cases referred to by the Party concerned, the pending cases concerning Borssele Nuclear Power Plant before the Espoo Convention Implementation Committee and the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee are completely different in substance. The communicant submits that its communication before the Aarhus Compliance Committee does not concern compliance with the Espoo Convention and the two Committees have been asked to investigate different things. The communicant accordingly requests the Committee to investigate the case on its merits without deferral.³⁵

³⁰ Communicant's reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1f.

³¹ Communication, p. 2, and communicant's reply to questions, 19 September 2014, annex 1i.

³² Communication, p. 2.

³³ ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2005/2/Add.3, para. 8.

³⁴ Party's response to the communication, paras. 4–7.

³⁵ Communicant's comments on the Party's response to the communication, 17 March 2015, p. 2.

D. Substantive issues

Applicability of article 6

37. The communicant alleges that the March 2013 decision extending the design lifetime of the Borssele plant (see para. 31 above) constituted an extension of activities of the plant that could have potentially severe effects on the environment.³⁶ It submits that this extension therefore constitutes a new activity under annex I, paragraph 1, to the Convention or, alternatively, is an extension in accordance with annex I, paragraph 22, and is thus subject to article 6, paragraph 1 (a), of the Convention. If not, it is at least an update of operating conditions under article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention.³⁷

38. The communicant states that, without the 2013 decision, the nuclear power plant would have had to cease operations and that therefore the decision falls under annex I of the Convention.³⁸ The communicant refers to the 1994 and 2002 agreements (see paras. 19 and 201 above), which established that the reactor would have to cease operation first by 2003 and then by 2013, to demonstrate that an extension occurred. It also refers to a statement made by the Government in the context of the elaboration of the 2006 Covenant in which it stated that the “initial intention, closure of the Borssele nuclear power plant, therefore constitutes the reference situation”.³⁹ The communicant also submits that the assumption of the Party concerned and the operator that the Borssele plant would have a design lifetime of 40 years, that is, until 2014, had also been the assumption of the public and a longer operational lifetime is therefore seen by the public as an extension of the project.⁴⁰

39. The communicant contends that the Ministry of Economic Affairs justified the lack of an environmental impact assessment with the argument that no material changes took place in the nuclear power plant before the lifetime extension was granted. The communicant submits that the Aarhus Convention makes clear that an extension of activities should be submitted to public participation concerning potential significant effects on the environment and a reference to material changes is, in that framework, irrelevant.⁴¹

40. The communicant alleges that allowing a further 20 years of operation of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant after its design lifetime of 40 years significantly increases the risk that possible incidents and accidents with severe environmental effects may occur, for example:

(a) An increasing risk of malfunction owing to ageing components and increased compatibility problems as a result of the introduction of new replacement components, potentially escalating into a severe accident with emissions of radioactive substances into the environment;

(b) A 50 per cent increase in the time that the plant is exposed to potential terrorist attack, sabotage or acts of war;

(c) A 50 per cent increase in the time that the plant is exposed to extreme natural events that could, alone or in combination with human failure or malevolent human acts, lead to emissions of radioactive substances into the environment;

(d) An increased risk of nuclear accident because of the planned use of the more dangerous mixed oxide (MOX) fuel;

³⁶ Communication, p. 2.

³⁷ Ibid. and communicant’s opening statement for hearing at the Committee’s fiftieth meeting, 8 October 2015.

³⁸ Communicant’s opening statement for hearing at the Committee’s fiftieth meeting, 8 October 2015, and communicant’s comments, 20 January 2016, para. 9.

³⁹ Communicant’s comments, 20 January 2016, para. 1.

⁴⁰ Communicant’s comments on Party’s response to the communication, 17 March 2015, pp. 3–4.

⁴¹ Communication, p. 2.

- (e) An increased use of uranium and therefore increased environmental impacts from uranium mining, processing and fuel production;
- (f) An increased production of radioactive waste;
- (g) The production of more toxic and higher level radioactive waste from the planned use of MOX fuel.⁴²

41. The Party concerned refutes the communicant's allegations. It claims that there was neither a request to change or to extend the installation of the Borssele plant nor a request to extend the operating time, because the initial 1973 licence was valid for an indefinite period. Rather, in order to make use of the licence after 2013, the operator had to demonstrate that the continuation of operation for a longer period was still possible within the applicable technical preconditions. It states that the operator provided this evidence in its application dated 12 September 2012, and that as a result an amendment to the safety report, extending the original design lifetime from 40 years to 60 years, and a change to the licence was required. The Party concerned submits that accordingly the extension of the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant is not an activity listed in annex I to the Convention and does not constitute a proposed activity within the meaning of article 6, paragraph 1 (a).⁴³

42. The Party concerned submits that the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele plant does not fall under article 6, paragraph 1 (b), of the Convention either. It contends that the extension does not concern whether the exploitation of the plant can be extended but only the adaptation of the safety report.⁴⁴ It alleges that the amendments in the safety report do not concern any change to or extension of the operation of the Borssele plant and, consequently, do not have more or less favourable environmental impacts than those considered in previous licences. Accordingly, the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele plant is not a proposed activity within the meaning of article 6, paragraph 1 (b).⁴⁵

43. The Party concerned further submits that the extension does not fall under article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention because the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele plant neither involved a physical change or extension nor had a potential significant effect on the environment.⁴⁶ The Party concerned submits that, in view of the Committee's findings on communication ACCC/C/2009/41 (Slovakia),⁴⁷ the adaptation of the safety report necessary for the extension of the design lifetime could be considered to involve a reconsideration and update of the operating conditions of the Borssele plant.⁴⁸ It distinguishes the Slovak case, however, on the basis that that case concerned the construction of two new units, which were, until that time, not in operation, and the related decisions entailed a number of new conditions for the operation of the nuclear power plant. It submits that in contrast, the updating of the safety report for Borssele Nuclear Power Plant did not entail the reconsideration or updating of the operating conditions as set out in article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention, because the operating limits and conditions and the technical parameters of the plant did not change.⁴⁹ The Party concerned suggests that the implementation of the Convention may benefit from further guidance by the Committee on the exact meaning of the term "operating conditions".⁵⁰

⁴² Communication, pp. 2–3, and communicant's comments, 20 January 2016, para. 3.

⁴³ Party's response to the communication, paras. 41–42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 45.

⁴⁷ ECE/MP.PP/2011/11/Add.3.

⁴⁸ Party's response to the communication, para. 45.

⁴⁹ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, para. 4.2.

⁵⁰ Party's response to the communication, para. 45.

44. The Party concerned submits that, if the Committee should conclude that the term “operating conditions” includes the adaptation of the safety report for the Borssele plant, it applied the provisions of article 6, paragraphs 2 to 9, “mutatis mutandis, and where appropriate” and therefore complied with the Convention in any event.⁵¹

Public participation under article 6 of the Convention

Public participation on the decision extending the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant

45. The communicant submits that the Party concerned did provide for public consultation prior to the 18 March 2013 decision extending the design lifetime of the Borssele plant but only on the limited issue of technical nuclear safety, thereby excluding issues relating to the potential impact on the environment.⁵²

46. The communicant also submits that, while there is no requirement under the Convention to carry out an environmental impact assessment procedure, there was no sufficient description of the significant effects of the proposed activity on the environment nor a description of the measures envisaged to prevent and/or reduce the effects, including emissions, as required by article 6, paragraph 6, of the Convention.⁵³ The communicant submits that the information included in the safety report did not, for example, contain an outline of main alternatives studied by the applicant, as required by article 6, paragraph 6 (e), or a description of the environmental impacts, as required by article 6, paragraph 6 (a) and (b)).⁵⁴ The communicant also submits that there was no description of the measures envisaged to prevent and/or reduce the effects, including emissions, as required by article 6, paragraph 6 (c)).⁵⁵ It contends that, in his letter of 10 January 2006 to parliament (see para. 23 above), the State Secretary for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment claimed that he had assessed “impacts on the electricity supply, environmental impacts including radiation impacts and some additional effects like safety and risk, non-proliferation, spatial planning and employment”.⁵⁶ The communicant submits that this demonstrates that the Government was holding further information on the potential environmental impacts of a lifetime extension but that this information was not systematically shared with the public prior to the 18 March 2013 decision.⁵⁷ The communicant claims that the public expressed viewpoints concerning the environment but was not able to do this on the basis of an assessment of potential impacts on the environment.⁵⁸

47. The communicant further submits that the procedure was not open to include viewpoints on the environment because the Party concerned had already decided that the extension of the design lifetime would not have any environmental impacts. The communicant states that the zero option was not analysed and there was no systematic assessment of potential environmental impacts.⁵⁹

48. Finally, the communicant submits that the Party concerned itself concedes (see para. 53 below) that the decision and the licence conditions were not adapted on the basis of any of the environmental concerns expressed by members of the public in the public

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Communication, p. 1, and communicant’s comments, 20 January 2016, para. 6.

⁵³ Communicant’s comments on the Party’s response to the communication, 17 March 2015, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Communicant’s comments, 20 January 2016, para. 4.

⁵⁵ Communicant’s comments on the Party’s response to the communication, 17 March 2015, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 1, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Communicant’s comments, 20 January 2016, para. 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Communicant’s comments on the Party’s response to the communication, 17 March 2015, p. 4.

participation procedure and that the Party concerned failed to take their viewpoints concerning environmental matters into account in the final decision.⁶⁰

49. The Party concerned submits that the public participation requirements of article 6 of the Convention with respect to nuclear reactors are adequately implemented in Division 3.4 of the General Administrative Law Act in conjunction with Division 13.2 of the Environmental Management Act and Section 17 of the Nuclear Energy Act.⁶¹

50. The Party concerned also submits that neither the 2006 Covenant nor the 2010 amendment to the Nuclear Energy Act bound the competent authority to an end date of 2033 when granting the March 2013 decision. If the long-term safety analyses had shown that the design lifetime could not safely be extended to 2033, the competent authority had the power, and a duty, to deny the licence extension or grant the extension for a shorter time on the basis of the interests cited in section 15b of the Nuclear Energy Act, which include the protection of persons, animals, plants and goods.⁶²

51. The Party concerned states that the public was notified of the draft decision through notices in several newspapers and on the Internet, and that during a six-week period the public was allowed to provide comments and views.⁶³ It claims that the decision was made public in due time and that, in addition, individual letters were sent to notify those persons who had expressed their views earlier.⁶⁴ It submits that, in the light of the above, it complied with the article 6, paragraphs 2–5, 7 and 9, of the Convention.

52. With regard to the provision of information under article 6, paragraph 6, of the Convention, the Party concerned submits that, in accordance with section 3.11 of the General Administrative Law Act, the preliminary decision, the application and all other relevant documents were physically available for examination in the municipality of Borssele and at the Ministry of Economic Affairs in the Hague and available for download on a government website.⁶⁵ Concerning the environmental effects of the decision to extend the design lifetime, the Party concerned refers to the negative environmental impact assessment screening decision and submits that this screening decision was also incorporated and extensively reasoned in section 3.1 of the decision and also mentioned in replies to views expressed on the topic in section 6.4.1.⁶⁶ It also submits that because the initial licence was valid for an indefinite period and had not expired, no more or less favourable environmental impacts were to be expected of the decision to extend the design lifetime than had already been considered in previous licensing procedures.⁶⁷ The Party concerned also states that the analysis commissioned by the State Secretary for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment in 2006 on the consequences of the closure or continued operation of the plant was made available to the public as an appendix to the State Secretary's letter to parliament of 10 January 2006.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Party's response to the communication, paras. 38–39.

⁶² Party's comments on the draft findings, 3 July 2018, para. 6.

⁶³ Party's response to the communication, paras. 47–48 and 51.

⁶⁴ Ibid., para. 54.

⁶⁵ Ibid., para. 49.

⁶⁶ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, para. 2.2. See Party's response to the communication, appendix 6, for the 18 March 2013 decision extending the design lifetime of the nuclear power plant.

⁶⁷ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, para. 3.2, referring to sect. 6.4 of the decision extending the design lifetime of the nuclear power plant (Party's response to the communication, appendix 6).

⁶⁸ Party's comments on draft findings, 3 July 2018, para. 12.

53. While the Party concerned concedes that the decision itself and the licence conditions were not adapted as a result of the public's comments, it submits that the competent authority took due account of the public's views in accordance with article 6, paragraph 8, of the Convention and that the reasoning of the 2013 decision was clarified on a number of points.⁶⁹

54. The Party concerned also argues that the public consultation was not limited to the issue of technical nuclear safety but also included issues relating to the potential impact on the environment. The Party concerned submits that, in accordance with Divisions 3.4 of the General Administrative Law Act and 13.2 of the Environmental Management Act, anyone could have submitted an opinion on the preliminary decision. It submits that in the preliminary decision and other relevant documents the proposed changes to the safety report were clearly set out. The Party concerned argues that models and calculations were used to explain the consequences of extending the design lifetime and to indicate that the extension of the design lifetime would not have any environmental impacts.⁷⁰ It also submits that the final decision addresses environmental effects and the views of the public expressed on that topic.⁷¹

Earlier public participation procedures related to Borssele Nuclear Power Plant

55. The communicant submits that there were no previous public participation procedures that explicitly assessed environmental issues regarding the effects of operating the Borssele plant beyond 2013.⁷² Contrary to the submission of the Party concerned (see para. 58 below), the communicant alleges that the environmental impact of the utilization of MOX fuel beyond 2013 was not considered.⁷³

56. The communicant further submits that neither the 2006 Covenant nor the 2010 amendment of the Nuclear Energy Act were subject to public participation procedures. It submits that, on its own initiative, it submitted views on a 2005 study commissioned by the Government in the preparation of the 2006 Covenant and that the parliament invited specific stakeholders to give input, including the communicant, but that there were no opportunities for the public in general to participate.⁷⁴

57. The communicant alleges that the conclusion of the 2006 Covenant was a decision in a tiered decision-making process that led to a de facto lifetime extension of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant and thus should have been preceded by public participation.⁷⁵

58. The Party concerned concedes that the extension of the design lifetime of the Borssele plant was not considered in the environmental impact assessments carried out in 1996, 2004 and 2011 in the context of the 1996, 2004 and 2013 changes to the licence. The Party concerned claims, however, that the 2011 environmental impact assessment report on MOX fuel took into account the fact that that fuel would be used until the end of 2033.⁷⁶

59. With regard to the 2006 Covenant, the Party concerned submits that this agreement in fact led to a restriction of the operating time of the Borssele plant because the licence had

⁶⁹ Party's response to the communication, para. 53.

⁷⁰ Ibid., para. 52.

⁷¹ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, para. 3.2.

⁷² Communicant's comments, 20 January 2016, paras. 5 and 9.

⁷³ Communicant's comments, 20 January 2016, para. 5, and communicant's comments on draft findings, 22 June 2018, pp. 1–2, citing para. 55 of the Decision: Permission under the law on nuclear energy, granted to NV EPZ for the benefit of fuel diversification of the nuclear power plant Borssele, dated 24 June 2011.

⁷⁴ Communicant's comments, 20 January 2016, para. 10.

⁷⁵ Communicant's comments on reply to questions from the Party concerned, 11 April 2017.

⁷⁶ Party's response to the communication, paras. 15 and 20.

been issued for an indefinite period and the Covenant stipulates closure of the nuclear power plant by 2033.⁷⁷ The Party concerned further submits that prior to the conclusion of the 2006 Covenant there was no lawful justification to withdraw the licence of the plant operator and, in accordance with article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights), the operator would have had a right to receive compensation if the operating licence for the plant had been terminated.⁷⁸

60. The Party concerned also submits that at the time that the communication was submitted it was in the process of evaluating the 10-year safety review carried out in 2013. It submits that a conceptual improvement plan had to be prepared by the plant operator for this purpose. On the basis of this plan, the competent authority would decide which measures had to be implemented by the operator. If those measures included measures for which an amendment of the licence would be needed, a procedure according to Division 3.4 of the General Administrative Law Act, including public participation and possibly an environmental impact assessment, would follow.⁷⁹

III. Consideration and evaluation by the Committee

61. The Netherlands ratified the Aarhus Convention on 29 December 2004. The Convention entered into force for the Netherlands on 29 March 2005.

Admissibility and request for deferral

62. The Committee notes that the communicant unsuccessfully sought to challenge the licence amendment of 18 March 2013 extending the design lifetime of the Borssele plant before the Council of State (see para. 33 above). The Committee also notes the communicant's submission that no further domestic remedies were available and that the Party concerned has not challenged the admissibility of the communication on this ground. The Committee therefore finds the communication to be admissible.

63. With respect to the request by the Party concerned for a deferral of the Committee's consideration of the communication in the light of the ongoing parallel investigation before the Espoo Convention Implementation Committee (see para. 35 above), the present case concerns claims under the Aarhus Convention that are independent of whether a duty to conduct a transboundary environmental impact assessment was required under the Espoo Convention. The Committee therefore considers that there is no need to defer consideration of the communication.

Article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention

Reconsideration or update of operating conditions

64. The Committee notes that neither the communicant nor the Party concerned exclude the possibility that article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention could potentially apply to the licence amendment of 18 March 2013 extending the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant. However, the Party concerned submits that there was no update in the operating conditions in the present case because the initial licence of 1973 was valid for an

⁷⁷ Ibid., para. 11; Party's opening statement for hearing at the Committee's fiftieth meeting, 8 October 2015, p. 3; and reply to questions from the Party concerned, 16 March 2017.

⁷⁸ Party's reply to clarification request, 6 April 2017, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Party's response to the communication, para. 26.

indefinite period (see para. 41 above) and the operating limits and conditions and the technical parameters of the Borssele plant did not change (see para. 43 above).

65. The Committee cannot agree with the position of the Party concerned that the fact that the 1973 licence was for an “indefinite” period means that the 2013 licence amendment extending the design lifetime until 2033 was not a change in the plant’s operating conditions. Indeed, the Party concerned itself states that “at the time of the original design and construction of the Borssele nuclear power plant, it was assumed that it would have a design lifetime of 40 years, i.e., until 2014.”⁸⁰ It is also clear from the documentation that, without the 18 March 2013 decision, the plant was not permitted to operate beyond 2014.⁸¹ The Committee considers that the permitted duration of an activity is clearly an operating condition for that activity, and an important one at that. Accordingly, any change to the permitted duration of an activity, be it a reduction or an extension, is a reconsideration or update of that activity’s operating conditions. It follows that any decision permitting the nuclear power plant to operate beyond 2014 amounted to an update of the operating conditions.

66. Based on the above, the Committee considers that the decision of 18 March 2013, by amending the licence to extend the design lifetime of the nuclear power plant until 31 December 2033, updated the operating conditions of the plant. Accordingly, under article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention, the Party concerned was obliged to ensure that the provisions of article 6, paragraphs 2 to 9, were applied, *mutatis mutandis*, and where appropriate to that decision.

67. In the light of the above, it is not necessary in the present case to consider whether article 6, paragraph 1 (a), would also apply to the 2013 licence amendment, either in conjunction with paragraph 1 or paragraph 20 of annex I to the Convention.

“Mutatis mutandis” and “where appropriate”

68. Having found that the March 2013 licence amendment to extend its design lifetime constituted an update of the nuclear power plant’s operating conditions under article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention, the Committee examines whether the requirements of article 6, paragraph 10, were in fact met by the Party concerned in this case.

69. Pursuant to article 6, paragraph 10, the Party concerned was obliged to ensure that the provisions of article 6, paragraphs 2 to 9, were applied “*mutatis mutandis*” and “where appropriate” to the March 2013 decision.

(i) *Mutatis mutandis*

70. The reference in paragraph 10 to “*mutatis mutandis*” simply means “with the necessary changes”.⁸² In other words, when applying the provisions of paragraphs 2 to 9 of

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 41.

⁸¹ See, for example, the notification of the decision of 18 March 2013 (Party’s response to the communication, appendix 8), p. 1: “In order to make use of the licence under the Nuclear Energy Act after 2013, NV EPZ must demonstrate that the continuation of operations until 2034 is possible within the relevant technical parameters ... As a result of this justification for extending the provisional period of operation to 2034, an amendment to the safety report and a change to the licence under the Nuclear Energy Act are required.”

⁸² Bryan A. Garner, ed., *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Saint Paul, Minnesota, West Thomson Reuters, 2014).

article 6 to a reconsideration or an update of the operating conditions for an article 6 activity, the public authority applies those paragraphs with the necessary changes.⁸³

(ii) *Where appropriate*

71. With respect to “where appropriate”, the Committee recalls that, in its findings on communication ACCC/C/2009/41 (Slovakia), it held that, although each Party had some discretion under article 6, paragraph 10, that did not imply complete discretion for the Party concerned to determine whether or not it was appropriate to provide for public participation.⁸⁴ In its findings on communication ACCC/C/2013/99 (Spain), the Committee stated that the discretion as to the “appropriateness” of the application of the provisions of paragraphs 2 to 9 of article 6 of the Convention had to be considered to be even more limited if the update in the operating conditions might itself have a significant effect on the environment.⁸⁵ The Committee considers that, except in cases where a change to the permitted duration is for a minimal time and obviously would have insignificant or no effects on the environment, it is appropriate for extensions of duration to be subject to the provisions of article 6. In this regard, the Committee considers it inconceivable that the operation of a nuclear power plant could be extended from 40 years to 60 years without the potential for significant environmental effects. The Committee accordingly concludes that it was appropriate, and thus required, to apply the provisions of article 6, paragraphs 2–9, to the 2013 decision amending the licence for the Borssele plant to extend its design lifetime until 2033.

Compliance with the requirements of article 6

72. Having found that the Party concerned was obliged pursuant to article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention to carry out a public participation procedure meeting the requirements of article 6, paragraphs 2 to 9, for the 2013 licence amendment extending the design lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant until 2033, the Committee examines the extent to which the Party concerned met those requirements below.

73. The Committee notes that it is common ground between the parties that the Government conducted a public participation procedure prior to issuing the 2013 decision to extend the design lifetime of the Borssele plant. The communicant submits, however, that this public participation procedure was only on the safety aspects of the lifetime extension and did not fulfil the requirements of article 6 of the Convention in several respects. In particular, while not linking its allegations to specific paragraphs of article 6, the communicant alleges that the Party did not provide the public the opportunity to participate in a way that took into account environmental matters, that it did not provide the public with the information prescribed in article 6 concerning the environment, that public participation was not provided at an early stage when all options were open and that the public’s viewpoints concerning environmental matters were not taken into account in the final decision. The Committee examines the Party’s compliance with the provisions of article 6 below.

Article 6, paragraph 4, in conjunction with article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention

74. The communicant submits that, by virtue of the 2006 Covenant, the Party concerned was bound to extend the lifetime of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant until 2033 or else to potentially pay significant compensation to the operator. It claims that during the decision-

⁸³ See also *The Aarhus Convention: An Implementation Guide*, 2nd ed. (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.II.E.3), p. 159.

⁸⁴ ECE/MP.PP/2011/11/Add.3, para. 55.

⁸⁵ ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2017/17, para. 85.

making on the 2013 decision the zero option – that is, not extending the lifetime of the plant beyond 2013 – was therefore not considered. It submits that the 2006 Covenant was part of a tiered decision-making procedure and should have been preceded by public participation.

75. With respect to the 2006 Covenant, the Party concerned submits that, rather than forming part of a decision on extension, the Covenant in fact was an agreement between the Party concerned and the operator to limit the duration of its operating time, as the 1973 licence had been issued for an indefinite period. The Party concerned submits, moreover, that neither the 2006 Covenant nor the 2010 amendment to the Nuclear Energy Act bound the competent authority to an end date of 2033 when granting the 2013 decision if the long-term safety analyses had shown that the design lifetime could not safely be extended to that date and if that were the case, no compensation would be payable to the plant operator.⁸⁶

76. In order to meet the requirements of article 6, paragraph 4, public participation must take place at an early stage of the decision-making process, when all options are open and when due account can be taken of the outcome of the public participation.⁸⁷ As the Committee held in its findings on communication ACCC/C/2007/22 (France),

this implies that when public participation is provided for, the permit authority must be neither formally nor informally prevented from fully turning down an application on substantive or procedural grounds. If the scope of the permitting authority is already limited due to earlier decisions, then the Party concerned should have also ensured public participation during the earlier stages of decision-making.⁸⁸

77. The Committee notes that, while the 2006 Covenant did not in itself amount to a decision under article 6 of the Convention, it stipulated that the Government would refrain from taking measures intended to close Borssele Nuclear Power Plant before 2033 and established that the Government was required to compensate the operator if it failed to do so (see para. 24 above). The Party concerned submits that it was already potentially liable under the European Convention on Human Rights to pay compensation should it have terminated the licence, and the 2006 Covenant accordingly did not alter its position. The Committee considers that whether or not a claim by the operator for compensation could have succeeded prior to concluding the 2006 Covenant,⁸⁹ that agreement created a new, enforceable contractual obligation on the public authorities not to interfere with the plant's operation until 2033. The Committee further considers that even if, as the Party asserts, the 2006 Covenant formally limited the duration of the licence from an indefinite period to 2033, it thereby agreed the date on when the plant was to cease operation, which was an important aspect of the decision-making procedure concerning the nuclear power plant.

78. The Committee emphasizes, moreover, that even if pursuant to article 10.4 of the Covenant no compensation would be payable if the plant was closed before 2033 for not complying with the applicable safety requirements, the possibility for the competent authorities to refuse to grant the 2013 licence amendment solely on the grounds of nuclear safety does not equate to all options being open in accordance with article 6, paragraph 4, of the Convention.

79. The Party concerned does not dispute that the legislative amendment of 1 July 2010 inserting section 15a (1) into the Nuclear Energy Act resulted from the 2006 Covenant.⁹⁰ Section 15a (1) of the Nuclear Energy Act specifically set the end date of 31 December

⁸⁶ Party's comments on the draft findings, 3 July 2018, paras. 5–6.

⁸⁷ Findings on communication ACCC/C/2008/26 (Austria) (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2009/6/Add.1), para. 66.

⁸⁸ ECE/MP.PP/2009/4/Add.1, para. 38.

⁸⁹ Comments from the Party concerned on the communicant's comments, 19 February 2016, annex, pp. 2–3.

⁹⁰ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, paras. 5.1–5.2.

2033 for the nuclear power plant, thereby establishing the parameters for the 18 March 2013 licence amendment.

80. The communicant submits that prior to the conclusion of the 2006 Covenant and the 2010 amendment of the Nuclear Energy Act only selected stakeholders were invited by parliament to comment and this has not been disputed by the Party concerned.⁹¹ As the Committee held in its findings on communication ACCC/C/2010/51 (Romania), participation in closed advisory groups cannot be considered as public participation meeting the requirements of the Convention.⁹² The Committee accordingly considers that the public did not have the opportunity to participate in a manner that would meet the requirements of article 6 prior to the 2010 amendment to the Nuclear Energy Act.

81. With respect to the possibility for the public to submit comments on the duration of the nuclear power plant's lifetime during the 2012 public participation procedure, in his response in the 18 March 2013 decision to the comments received from the public on various topics, the Minister repeatedly reiterates: "NV EPZ has a licence for [Borssele Nuclear Power Plant] for an indefinite period, limited by Section 15a (1) of the Nuclear Energy Act to the end of 2033". Elsewhere he states: "The fact is that NV EPZ has a licence to maintain the [Borssele plant] in operation for an indefinite period and that under the [2006] Covenant and Section 15a of the Nuclear Energy Act the date of shutdown has already been decided."⁹³ In the Committee's view, the Minister's repeated statements on this point clearly demonstrate that the duration of the nuclear power plant until 2033 was already set prior to the 2012 public participation procedure.

82. Based on the above, the Committee finds that, by not having at any stage provided for public participation, meeting the requirements of article 6, where all options were open, in regard to setting the end date of 31 December 2033 for the operation of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant, the Party concerned failed to comply with article 6, paragraph 4, in conjunction with article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention with respect to the licence amendment of 18 March 2013.

Other provisions of article 6

83. In the light of its finding in paragraph 82 above, the Committee considers it unnecessary to proceed to examine the compliance of the 2012 public participation procedure with the other provisions of article 6. Since the Party concerned did not provide for public participation meeting the requirements of article 6 prior to setting the end date of the nuclear power plant's operation in the 2006 Covenant and the 2010 amendment to the Nuclear Energy Act, it was not possible for the Party concerned to rectify that non-compliance through the subsequent public participation procedure carried out prior to the 2013 licensing decision.

84. While the Committee will accordingly not further examine the compliance of the 2012 public participation procedure with the requirements of article 6, it considers it useful to make observations on certain aspects of the case that are relevant for the correct implementation of article 6, paragraphs 6 and 8.

Article 6, paragraph 6 of the Convention

85. While, as acknowledged by the communicant, article 6, paragraph 6, of the Convention does not require an environmental impact assessment to be carried out, the competent public authorities must as a minimum provide the public concerned with access

⁹¹ Communicant's comments, 20 January 2016, para. 10.

⁹² ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2014/12, para. 109.

⁹³ Party's response to the communication, appendix 6, p. 32.

to the information listed in subparagraphs (a)-(f) of that provision. The Committee points out that, in the context of decision-making on the extension of the design lifetime of a nuclear power plant, article 6, paragraph 6 (b), requires that information on the environmental effects of such a longer operation should be made available to the public concerned. The communicant alleges that in the present case the public authorities held relevant information on this point but did not make it available to the public concerned in a systematic manner during the public participation procedure on the March 2013 licensing decision (see para. 46 above). The Party concerned acknowledges that an analysis on the consequences of ending or continuing the operation of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant after 2013 was commissioned by the State Secretary for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment and appended to his opinion to parliament of 10 January 2006.⁹⁴ The Party concerned submits that, having been appended to the State Secretary's opinion of 10 January 2006, the analysis was thereby made available to the public.⁹⁵ The Committee considers that it goes without saying that an analysis commissioned by the State Secretary for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment on the consequences of ending or continuing the operation of the Borssele plant after 2013 would be highly relevant to any decision-making to grant a lifetime extension of that plant beyond 2013. Since as already indicated (see para. 83 above) the Committee will not make a finding on article 6, paragraph 6, it is not necessary for the Committee to ascertain whether or not the above analysis was in the possession of the competent public authorities at the time that the 2012 public participation procedure was carried out. The Committee points out, however, that the fact that the analysis was attached to an opinion submitted to parliament in 2006 does not amount to giving the public concerned access to all available information relevant to a decision-making procedure carried out in the period 2012–2013, that is, more than six years later.

Article 6, paragraph 8

86. Since as noted in paragraph 83 above, a public participation procedure carried out after the end date of the operation of the nuclear power plant had already been set cannot make up for a failure to provide for public participation fulfilling the requirements of article 6 before the duration of the plant's operation was decided, it would serve no purpose for the Committee to examine the compliance with article 6, paragraph 8, of the 2012 public participation procedure. However, notwithstanding that the 2012 public participation procedure was held too late to meet the requirements of article 6 of the Convention with respect to the decision to extend the nuclear power plant's operation until 2033, the Committee commends the format used in the 18 March 2013 decision to summarize, group and respond to the comments received from the public and considers that such a format may serve as a useful example for Convention Parties on how to deal with comments received from the public in the text of a decision subject to article 6 in a well-structured, clear and sufficiently detailed way.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

87. Having considered the above, the Committee adopts the findings and recommendations set out in the following paragraphs:

A. Main findings with regard to non-compliance

88. The Committee finds that, by not having at any stage provided for public participation, meeting the requirements of article 6, where all options were open, in regard

⁹⁴ Additional information from the Party concerned, 13 November 2015, annex 3, para. 5.2.

⁹⁵ Party's comments on draft findings, 3 July 2018, para. 11.

to setting the end date of 31 December 2033 for the operation of Borssele Nuclear Power Plant, the Party concerned failed to comply with article 6, paragraph 4, in conjunction with article 6, paragraph 10, of the Convention with respect to the licence amendment of 18 March 2013.

B. Recommendations

89. Pursuant to paragraph 36 (b) of the annex to decision I/7 of the Meeting of the Parties, and noting the agreement of the Party concerned that the Committee take the measures requested in paragraph 37 (b) of the annex to decision I/7, the Committee recommends that the Party concerned take the necessary legislative, regulatory and administrative measures to ensure that, when a public authority reconsiders or updates the duration of any nuclear-related activity within the scope of article 6 of the Convention, the provisions of paragraphs 2 to 9 of article 6 are applied.
