

Economic Commission for Europe

Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on
access to information, public participation
in decision-making and access to justice
in environmental matters

Fourth session

Chisinau, 29 June–1 July 2011

Item 11 of the provisional agenda

Discussion and adoption of the Declaration

Rio plus Aarhus — 20 years on: Bearing fruit and looking forward*

Chisinau Declaration

As adopted on 1 July 2011

1. We, the Ministers and heads of delegation from Parties and Signatories to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), together with representatives of other States, international, regional and non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians and other representatives of civil society throughout the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region and beyond, gathered at the fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties, are convinced that environmental rights and democracy are essential elements of good governance and informed decision-making and a prerequisite for achieving the objective of sustainable development. Since the adoption of the Rio Declaration in 1992, and continuing through the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, we have seen a continued reinforcement of environmental democracy, including the adoption of the Aarhus Convention, its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, as well as the United Nations Environment Programme Guidelines for the Development of National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, which reflect the Aarhus principles at the global level.

2. The Convention has strongly contributed to putting Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration into practice and has proved an effective tool for promoting public participation in environmental decision-making and access to information and justice in environmental matters. It will continue to do so through amongst other things the compliance mechanism, a special instrument in the sense that it can be triggered directly by the public; the active and continuous participation of civil society representatives through all its processes; an effective clearinghouse mechanism which showcases information on laws and practices throughout the UNECE region relevant to public rights; and capability to address many sectoral environmental matters. We recognize there are still considerable obstacles to overcome in order to achieve a full and balanced application of Principle 10 in the Aarhus family. We remain committed to work for full implementation of the Convention.

* The document was not formally edited.

3. Openness, transparency, a wide participatory approach and accountability are key principles and objectives of the Aarhus Convention. Through the promotion of these principles in international environmental decision-making processes, the principles of the Aarhus Convention can be directly applied to the Rio+20 process. We underline the importance of promoting these principles in international fora and of continuing to promote them in the preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) 2012.

4. Worldwide, social, economic and environmental challenges are becoming increasingly complex and interrelated. This fact should not discourage the public from involvement in decision-making. Governments must provide the necessary stimulus, tools, information and assistance to enable transparent decision-making processes in order to ensure informed, balanced and effective public participation. Making decisions and decision-making processes fully accountable to the public whom they should serve should become essential and not only procedural.

I. Aarhus and the green economy

5. The will and action of Governments and intergovernmental bodies to properly reflect public concerns should be matched by commitment and action from all stakeholders, including the wider business community in order to achieve sustainable development. In this regard corporate social and environmental responsibility, transparency and accountability could help to achieve this goal. Clear action should be further promoted among the wider business community.

6. The recent economic crisis and recovery programmes can provide both an incentive and an opportunity to take a more sustainable path. Innovation and technological progress can contribute to reducing our ecological footprint, but by themselves they will not lead to sustainability and a better quality of life. There has been progress in recognising the economic benefits of sustainability as well as the potential opportunities it presents for society as a whole, including enterprise. The economic and social value of the environment and environmental impacts of today's actions should be fully reflected in all decisions at policy, strategic and project levels, particularly in the light of increasing pressure on resources for rapid global economic development and population growth. The social dimension of sustainable development, which includes key elements such as poverty eradication, employment, social inclusion, corporate responsibility or gender equality, is also closely linked to public participation in decision-making.

7. Similarly to the greening of the economy, public participation in decision-making is not a self-standing objective, but rather an instrument for achieving the sustainability and well-being of society. We consider that, in line with Principle 10, citizens should be invited to participate in defining and implementing green economy programmes and in choosing the most appropriate road maps to sustainability.

II. Aarhus and environmental governance

8. Achieving good environmental decision-making at the national level is closely related to environmental governance at the global level. In this regard, we consider that the preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and its deliberations should serve as a model of how to implement Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, with a high level of public participation, including a wide range of stakeholders being given an opportunity to present their visions for a sustainable future and influence decision-making.

9. While the last two decades have witnessed the adoption or upgrading of a range of important multilateral environmental instruments, including the Aarhus Convention itself, the efficiency of international governance on environmental matters could still be significantly improved. The environmental part of international policies remains arguably the weakest of the three pillars of sustainable development.

10. Improved coordination, effectiveness and a synergistic implementation of multilateral environmental instruments must continue to be a priority. The Aarhus Convention provides an opportunity in this regard, through its engagement with other multilateral agreements, as has been the case already through work on the promotion of public participation in international forums and the regular exchange of information on activities among convention secretariats. Joint workshops, such as with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity, are also good examples of how Aarhus and other international conventions have succeeded in working together.

11. It is vital that the public has effective channels for input into international environmental processes as well as input at the national level. The process of deciding on priorities, mandates and financial contributions for the range of international agendas, by no means limited to environmental policy, should not only be more efficiently coordinated, but also transparent, inclusive and accountable. When defining positions in relation to their international agenda, Governments should strive to reflect the views of the public on sustainable development.

12. We request the Participants in the Rio+20 Conference to take into account the Aarhus Convention principles in their consideration of the institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD), including the options for broader institutional reform identified in UNEP's Nairobi-Helsinki Outcome, as a contribution to strengthening the IFSD by improving international environmental governance.

III. Looking ahead

13. We recognize there are still steps to be taken in order to achieve a full and balanced application of Principle 10 in the Aarhus family. Both at global scale, by further introducing the Aarhus Principles in other environmental conventions, as well as within our Convention, the planned in-depth evaluation of the functioning of the Convention will help us in further improving its implementation, thus strengthening our contribution to putting Principle 10 into practice.

14. We are aware that we owe it to future generations to minimize the depletion of environmental resources that should remain available to them. The children and youth of today are watching our steps, which will determine the quality of life for them and their children. We have a duty to serve by example in making the right choices.

15. We consider that our work in implementing the Aarhus Convention is paving the way for a universal application of Principle 10. While recognising that there are different ways to implement that principle, we offer to share our experience with all countries that wish to join the Aarhus family, to replicate its achievements or to be inspired by this most ambitious venture in environmental democracy undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations. In this regard we draw their attention to the procedure for accession. We stand ready to contribute to the success and outcomes of the Rio+20.