

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
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High-Level Segment

Statement by Mr. Raimonds Vejonis, Minister of Environment, Latvia.

Advancing sustainable development in the UNECE region: a success story or a missed opportunity for the Aarhus Convention?

The session is expected to take stock of successes and failures in implementing the Convention to date in order to create a snapshot which can guide future action towards full implementation.

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,
I am most honoured to participate in this high-level segment of the meeting and to discuss our achievements under the Aarhus Convention which is - as it has been correctly pointed out by the organizers – a leading international instrument on environmental democracy.

Latvia ratified the Aarhus Convention in 2002. Now we have 10 years of experience working according to the Aarhus Convention's principles and requirements. I would like to stress that these 10 years have been indeed challenging and have given good results in developing environmental protection policy with broad involvement of the public as well as in advancing the approach of sustainable development in implementation of different policies.

1. Assessing experience of the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), we can admit that it has greatly contributed to strengthening democracy in this region as it was hoped by adoption of the Convention in 1998. Similar hopes were expressed concerning contribution towards sustainable and environmentally sound development. Indeed, we have to admit that sustainable development is one of the goals of the Convention in a broader context. Without that approach we cannot speak about the right of every person of present and future generations to live in healthy environment.

2. Accordingly, implementation of the Convention advances sustainable development in the countries of the region. I would like to emphasize that the UNECE region has benefited greatly from the entry into force of the Convention.

3. In fact, the Convention has set a high global standard of environmental governance. It might be difficult to find a comparable instrument in the domain of access to information, public participation and access to justice elsewhere in the world. Thus the Convention is one of the best manifestations of the progress made in advancing sustainable development since the Stockholm Declaration.

4. On the other hand, successful implementation of the Convention is still a challenge for the Parties to ensure not only adoption of the relevant legislation but also effective application thereof. Thus every Party has to do regular homework to maintain compliance with the Convention both in theory and in practice. Proceedings before the Convention's Compliance Committee as well as before national administrative and judicial authorities prove how difficult this task may be.

5. Nevertheless, we certainly can see that implementation of the Aarhus Convention in the recent decade has already contributed to advancing sustainable development in many countries.
6. The legal instruments and principles established by the Aarhus Convention have influenced greatly rights of the public to be informed and involved in policy and decision making concerning sustainable development.
7. The Convention has been as a guide in developing rights of the public in different policies. However, the Convention merits special praise for promoting sustainable development through assuring rights in environmental field.
8. The impact of Convention's implementation is hard to overestimate – it has facilitated addressing environmental, economic and social dimensions in a constructive manner, aiming at balancing those issues for the common goal of sustainable development.
9. In Latvia, implementation of the Convention has exceeded the original environmental domain. For example, it has contributed significantly to granting broad access to information in any field under responsibility of public authorities. The public participation pillar has deeply penetrated into legislative process, allowing the public to participate in preparation of virtually any legislative proposal.
10. Additionally, I would like to point out as a minister being responsible for environmental protection as well as regional development, that the principles and mechanism provided by the Aarhus Convention *on rights of the public and governance accountability* are really those which we are using also in developing policy on regional development.
11. It is the way how we can balance different stakeholder interests and adopt policies and decisions accepted by the different members of the public or at least get a better understanding of the society moving towards sustainable and environmentally sound development.
12. I am sure that this broad implementation of the principles of the Aarhus Convention we can regard as a success story of the Convention in advancing sustainable development.
13. It would be a missed opportunity if we would stop doing our best to advance implementation of the Convention and making better links with development of different policies in a sustainable way.
14. Taking into account recent developments, global and regional commitments to green economy as well as the upcoming Rio+20 Conference we really have an opportunity to use the principles of the Aarhus Convention on public involvement, promoting also active participation. Without that we cannot achieve sustainability of our policies and environmentally sound development.

Thank you for your attention!