

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

General Segment

Item 4 (e):

Substantive issues: public participation in international forums

Statement by the Chair of the Task Force on Public Participation in International Forums

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, members of the delegations and of non-governmental organizations, national and international experts,

It is a great pleasure to address you after three years of work as the Chair of the Task Force on public participation in international forums. I should like to quickly report on the work of this period and to comment on the development of this very important axis of the Convention

First of all, during the past three years the stakes relating to public participation in international forums have greatly increased. Two main facts point to this.

The first one is simple: as environmental concerns have been growing in our European societies, civil society is expecting more from the international negotiations, which are considered to be crucial for addressing environmental challenges. Beyond the failure of the Copenhagen Conference, it is necessary to keep in mind the very high expectations of the people vis-à-vis their negotiators, and also their request for results, a request that has been let down this time.

The second fact is less visible, but it is part of the outcomes of the Task Force work since 2005: the international forums are faced with many challenges relating to public participation and they turn more and more to the Aarhus Convention to seek lessons and tools.

Now, I would like to refer to the work carried out by the Task Force. First, I wish to thank all those who have participated to the various meetings, in particular the workshops of June 2010 and February 2011. The reports of the fourth, fifth and sixth meetings and those of the two workshops have been circulated and are available on the web site of the Convention. They describe all outcomes and recommendations. The mandate we received in Riga envisaged two components for our work, which are in brief mentioned here.

The first component related to following and capitalizing on cooperation with other international forums. Today, as the outcome of this work, there is a document titled “Good practices and challenges of public participation in international forums”. The document has been translated as a UN official document and can be widely disseminated. I would like to add that at its last meeting, the Task Force made an important contribution to this document.

On this work with the international forums, our Task Force also held a special workshop in February 2011. At this workshop, we were able to draw lessons from the experiences of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and to elicit various issues regarding the preparations for Rio +20. We have also worked in a very concrete manner with the UNECE environmental agreements and the international finance institutions, which are confronted with very serious problems in their relationship with the public. The exchange was very rich.

The second component related to taking a greater interest in the obligations of the Parties arising from article 3, paragraph 7, of the Convention. The objective was to assist the Parties to implement this provision, at the national and international level, with their national and international partners, both in the preparation and then the process of the international negotiations. To this end, a workshop attended by many participants was

organized in June 2010. The number and quality of the presentations allowed for a lot of exchange that mainly sought to extract practical recommendations from the cases presented. This workshop added to the work towards the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, because the workshop summary was disseminated to the National Focal Points well in advance, so that Parties could submit their contributions to the to the Framework Convention on issues of public participation. Further, this workshop, on the basis of the presented experiences, has overall enabled to identify areas of work specifically at the national level.

Today, the Working Group of the Parties has reached a draft decision that would constitute a renewed mandate for public participation in international forums. This mandate confirms the continuation of the work with the international forums – those that wish so; it would further enhance the work at the national level, with tools such as training, and the development of the subject, on the basis of bilateral cooperation or of Parties' groups. This mandate actually expands the ambition and the tools for the implementation of PPIF, towards the already identified priority directions. To promote the principles of the Convention, it is crucial that the National Focal Points take all responsibility in their cooperation with their colleagues involved in other international negotiations. In this respect, several countries have informed of their initiatives at the national level, in particular of in-depth studies, that aim to inform their negotiators and officials of their obligations relating to the Convention and the Almaty Guidelines, and also to get to know their practices and constraints in this area.

Finally, this mandate will be carried out during the next three years, in a different arena. The Task Force made the progress possible; and today public participation in international forums requires being lead in a way which has more leverage from a political point of view, and that at the same time allows for flexibility to implement the mandate with various tools. This is why it is proposed that the Task Force cease to exist and that the Working Group of the Parties take charge of this mandate, in order to bring about the necessary political interest, which again is necessary because of the expectations and the mobilization of the public and the international forums themselves. I therefore appeal to the Bureau and the Working Group of the Parties so that they are well aware that this change makes them bear new and very important responsibilities.

To sum up, I would like to warmly thank again the participants of the Task Force, but also those who organized and made all this work possible, particularly Fiona Marshall and all the Secretariat team, as well as the French Government for its support of the Task Force.

Thank you,

Etienne BALLAN