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Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on
Access to Information, Public Participation
in Decision-making and Access to Justice
in Environmental Matters

Sixth session

Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant
Release and Transfer Registers to the Convention
on Access to Information, Public Participation in
Decision-making and Access to Justice in
Environmental Matters

Third session

Joint High-level Segment
Budva, Montenegro, 14 September 2017

Report of the Joint High-level Segment

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I. Introduction

1. The Joint High-level Segment of the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and the third session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, which were organized back to back in Budva, Montenegro (11–15 September 2017), was held on 14 September 2017 at the invitation of the Government of the Montenegro.¹ At the end of the meeting participants adopted the Budva Declaration on Environmental Democracy for Our Sustainable Future (Budva Declaration), as set out in an addendum to the present document (ECE/M.P.PP/2017/16/Add.1-ECE/M.P.PRTR/2017/2/Add.1).

A. Attendance

2. The Joint High-level Segment was attended by delegations from the following Parties and signatories to the Convention and its Protocol: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3. Delegations from Guinea-Bissau and Namibia also attended.

4. In addition, representatives of the following United Nations system organizations were present: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States; the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Montenegro; the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). International organizations represented at the meeting included the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its Nuclear Energy Agency, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the office of the OSCE Project Coordinator in Ukraine, the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat, the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the OSCE Mission to Montenegro, the OSCE Mission to Serbia, the OSCE Presence in Albania, the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek and the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe.

5. Also attending the meeting were a number of judges and representatives of judicial institutions and review bodies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovakia. Some of those participants also represented the European Union Forum of Judges for the Environment.

6. Representatives of Aarhus Centres, regional environmental centres, international financial institutions, business and professional, research and academic organizations were also present, as were representatives of international, regional and national environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of whom coordinated their input within the framework of the European ECO Forum.

¹ Documents for the meeting, including the text of statements that were made available to the secretariat by delegates, are available online from http://www.unece.org/env/pp/aarhusprtr/mop6mopp3_hls.html.

B. Organizational matters

7. The Joint High-level Segment was chaired by Mr. Pavle Radulović, Minister for Sustainable Development and Tourism of Montenegro.

8. Delegations of Parties to the two treaties adopted the agenda as set out in the annotated provisional agenda (ECE/MP.PP/2017/15-ECE/MP.PRTR/2017/1).

9. In a welcoming address, Mr. Ivan Brajović, President of the Parliament of Montenegro, stressed the strategic decision of Montenegro, as the first country in the world to have declared itself an “Ecological State”, to respect the highest standards of environmental protection and harmonize them with long-term national social and economic interests. By doing so, Montenegro had acknowledged its debt to nature and its dedication to protecting it in the name of its own survival and the future of its people. Recognizing the principles enshrined in the Aarhus Convention as fundamental human rights, Mr. Brajović underlined the importance of the Aarhus Convention in strengthening basic democratic principles and in defining the future direction of sustainable development. There was a need to develop an appropriate “ecological” infrastructure to create a healthy environment and achieve implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It was particularly important to improve the transparency of governance by providing timely information to the interested public and by enhancing the public’s ability to influence the work of public administrations at an early stage of the decision-making process.

10. In her opening address, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) focused on the relevance of democracy, good governance and the rule of law to sustainable development. In particular, she recalled the crucial importance of protecting environmental activists and whistle-blowers. She also welcomed the initiative to promote the “Aarhus principles” in the Latin America and the Caribbean region through the possible future establishment of a regional agreement on access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters. Finally, she urged Parties and stakeholders to embrace the principles of transparency, accountability and just societies enshrined in both the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol, as they were paramount for the daily lives and well-being of people.

11. Before the start of the thematic session, the Parties to the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers approved the report on credentials for representatives attending the third session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol.²

II. Chair’s summary of the thematic session

12. The Joint High-level Segment included a thematic session consisting of two panels chaired by the Executive Secretary of ECE. Both panels were organized following a “Davos style” of discussion, with panellists invited to make introductory statements showcasing actions or initiatives that illustrated how the Aarhus Convention or its Protocol could be used to support the achievement of one or more Sustainable Development Goals. During the debate, opportunities were offered for statements or questions from the floor. The Chair’s summary of the debate is set out below.

13. In her introduction, the Chair of the thematic session underlined that the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol were key to ensuring the attainment of all the Sustainable

² For practical reasons, the report on credentials is included in the report on the third session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (ECE/MP.PRTR/2017/6).

Development Goals, and especially Goal 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. With regard to the Aarhus principles, access to information, public awareness and education were important prerequisites for achieving the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development related to health, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity and climate change. Moreover, inclusive and effective public participation in decision-making was critical, as challenges associated with sustainable development were best dealt with if Governments, NGOs, the public and other stakeholders worked together to find the best sustainable options. Finally, Goal 16 on peace and justice was particularly closely linked to the two treaties. The principles of accountability, transparency, participatory decision-making and the rule of law contained in Goal 16 and enshrined in the Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers were crucial for the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals, whether directly or otherwise. The thematic session discussion and the Budva Declaration would offer an opportunity to showcase how Governments, international organizations, NGOs and other stakeholders could contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through an inclusive, transparent and participatory process.

A. Panel 1

14. Mr. Pavle Radulović, Minister of Sustainable Development and Tourism of Montenegro, started by evoking the establishment of the first regional nature park “Piva” as a successful example of public participation in decision-making related to sustainable development. That example proved that public participation helped to build a community spirit and led to acceptable agreements and solutions, and that transparency formed the basis for the success of any initiative. Indeed, in the case of Piva Park the provision of adequate information had reduced the risk of arbitrary assumptions that could have potentially led to negative outcomes, and the lessons learned from it had encouraged the public authorities to further improve communication with its citizens.

15. Mr. Harry Liiv, Deputy Minister of the Environment of Estonia, elaborated on how access to environmental information and public participation contributed to the attainment of water-related Sustainable Development Goals in Estonia. A specific example of the implementation of the principles of the Aarhus Convention was a national water price control mechanism, which not only made it possible to ensure the availability and sustainable management of drinking water and sanitation and fair and sustainable water prices, but also obliged water companies to disclose information through annual reports and guaranteed the right for the public to access courts to challenge water prices. Mr. Liiv expressed his strong belief that the principles of the Aarhus Convention could be applied in other sectors and that the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals could be more transparent and inclusive.

16. Mr. Vuk Žugić, Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, outlined the activities of the Aarhus Centres’ network, which OSCE supported, in the 15 years since the network’s establishment. In addressing environment and security challenges, OSCE put emphasis on fostering dialogue between countries and the active involvement of all stakeholders in relevant decision-making. In that connection, through their mandate to raise public awareness of environmental issues, the Aarhus Centres had become a platform for dialogue and thus a bridge between civil society and governmental authorities. Mr. Žugić then enumerated the OSCE priorities for the future, such as strengthening the Aarhus Centres’ regional and subregional networking and cooperation, as well as supporting them in their engagement in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

17. Recalling the current unfavourable political context for environmental policies, as well as some existential threats from, for instance, climate change, Mr. Jeremy Wates, Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau and representative of the European ECO Forum, underlined the importance of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the crucial role of the public and NGOs in that ambitious process. There was a strong correlation between Goal 16 and the Aarhus Convention, as both aimed to create just, peaceful and inclusive societies. Given the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, he confirmed the willingness of the NGOs to contribute to the process.

18. The panel presentations were followed by interventions from the floor, starting with a statement by the United Nations Resident Coordinator and UNDP Representative in Montenegro, who focused on the participatory process leading up to the finalization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, involving 10 million people across the globe in consultations on defining “the future we want”. She further stressed the importance of the Budva Declaration in supporting the transition to the green economy and reaffirmed the readiness of UNDP to support efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

19. The representative of Georgia underlined that the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol could support achievement of almost all the Sustainable Development Goals. She confirmed the commitment of Georgia to pursue the implementation of the Convention. Among efforts undertaken so far by Georgia for the effective implementation of the Convention and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals were the establishment of the Environmental Information and Education Centre and the adoption of the Environmental Assessment Code and the Waste Management Code.

20. The representative of Switzerland confirmed the great emphasis Switzerland placed on the issue of sustainable development. In that regard, the Budva Declaration’s commitment to promoting environmental democracy was an essential precondition for achieving the Goals of the 2030 Agenda and for building a sustainable future. Based on the experience of Switzerland, he stressed the importance of an inclusive and transparent involvement of civil society in that process.

21. The representative of Finland informed participants that the country had actively started to take national measures to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably by adopting a National Implementation Plan in February 2017. The plan expressed the Government’s political will and set concrete measures for putting the 2030 Agenda into practice. Evoking the recent establishment of a “Youth Agenda 2030 Group”, she stressed the importance of translating the global goals into national policies and measures to help different actors to understand what the global goals meant to the country, and enabling commitment and ownership for action.

B. Panel 2

22. Opening the second panel, Mr. Per Ängquist, State Secretary of the Ministry of the Environment and Energy of Sweden, shared the ongoing Swedish initiatives aiming to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals using public access to environmental information as an educational tool. Noting an increasing interest from youth in having the right to speak, Sweden considered that it was important to focus more on environmental education. Swedish authorities had also created a website and a brochure, “Sverige I siffror” (“Sweden in figures”) to offer statistical information (including environmental

information) in an easy and understandable way.³ A second initiative, also targeting non-expert users, called “Environmental Weather”, which had been developed in a research project with 15 partners, provided real-time information on the levels of air pollution, allowing users to avoid areas with high concentration of emissions.

23. Mr. Mykola Kuzio, Deputy Minister for European Integration at the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Ukraine, presented a modern online application to collect information and raise public awareness, especially among youth, on the environmental status of the Black Sea (“Black Sea Save Book”). He then presented a second initiative regarding an online inventory of landfills in Ukraine.⁴ That instrument was particularly valuable for ensuring citizens’ active involvement in decision-making, as they could also use it to upload environmental information regarding landfills and waste management in Ukraine. Mr. Kuzio underlined the importance of using the tools presented as platforms for ensuring public participation in the decision-making process. Building coalitions between public authorities, NGO and other stakeholders was a basic precondition for promoting a wide reform agenda in Ukraine, which included public administration reform and the establishment of secondary legislation and practice as mechanisms for improving the status of the environment in the country.

24. Mr. Mihail Dimovski, Executive Director of the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe, summarized the work carried out by the Centre in South-Eastern Europe to improve access to justice with wide support from a number of stakeholders. The Centre’s projects helped improve knowledge and enhanced awareness of administrative bodies and courts in the subregion about the mechanisms of access to justice under the Aarhus Convention. In terms of future priorities, the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe was planning to continue its activities towards the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in South-Eastern Europe, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, focusing on supporting local efforts and the development of a legal policy and institutional framework. Its activities would also focus on access to justice, given the difficulties encountered by the public when contacting the judiciary system.

25. Mr. Stanko Zloković, Vice-President of the Chamber of Economy of Montenegro, said that the authorities in Montenegro aimed to implement the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention in their daily activities, encouraging companies to follow the same path and address several Sustainable Development Goals. As an example, the country was promoting a low carbon tourism project and the National Cleaner Production Programme already involved 13 companies in the country. As a result, the latter programme was not only creating “green jobs”, but also led to reducing water consumption, electricity and fuel oil, and to decreasing the carbon dioxide emissions.

26. The panellists’ presentations were followed by an intervention from the representative of OECD, who highlighted the potential of pollutant release and transfer registers to serve as a key tool for the assessment and promotion of progress towards several Sustainable Development Goals, and especially target 12.4 on environmentally sound management of chemicals and wastes. He thus encouraged all countries to integrate harmonized elements when establishing or revising their registers, so as to foster enhanced international comparability of pollutant release and transfer register data.

³ See <http://www.sverigeisiffror.scb.se>.

⁴ Available from <https://ecomapa.gov.ua>.

C. General observations, challenges and the way forward

27. The presentations and interventions from the floor during the two panels demonstrated that the environment is at the very heart of efforts to attain the Sustainable Development Goals and that access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters should be seen as universal principles that should guide action in every context. Leaving no one behind means that any decision-making related to the Sustainable Development Goals and their attainment needs to be transparent and inclusive.

28. It is therefore important to ensure that the application of the Aarhus principles is promoted also in sustainable development-related decision-making in the context of transboundary, bilateral or multilateral cooperation. The ECE region is fortunate to have available a whole suite of legal and policy instruments that can help countries develop such cooperation and build synergies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. These include multilateral environmental agreements such as the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, but also other programmes and processes. The Aarhus Convention and its Protocol are effectively the only legally binding instruments that implement Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and this offers the ECE region a comparative advantage for ensuring an inclusive and transparent process of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

29. Although all three pillars of environmental democracy, namely access to information, public participation and access to justice, are particularly relevant to several Sustainable Development Goals, it is important to underline that these pillars are also key for the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes both Goals that explicitly require the promotion of these principles (e.g., Goal 16) and those that do not refer directly to the engagement of the public but nevertheless rely heavily on it, such as targets geared towards reducing the impacts on human beings from harmful activities, those geared towards protection of ecosystems, those that promote sustainable production and consumption and those that seek to improve infrastructure.

30. For instance, access to information and public participation are crucially important not only for protecting natural resources and the environment (Goal 15) but also as drivers for green growth and employment (Goal 8). Another example of the interdependence between sustainability and the efficient use of resources is that investment in clean energy (Goal 7) and sustainable consumption and production (with the reduction of waste) (Goal 12) can create more jobs and lead to a green economy (Goal 8). It is therefore important to carry out trainings and campaigns to raise public awareness on the opportunities for promoting sustainable business practices, which are cost-efficient, support the achievement of several Goals and protect the environment. It is also worth noting that transparency and public participation in decision-making help secure the availability of clean and safe water, including sustainable management of drinking water and sanitation (Goal 6), protection of ecosystems (Goal 15) and, ultimately, the preservation of life on this planet.

31. Owing to their cross-cutting nature, the principles enshrined in the treaties are therefore fundamental for the attainment of all 17 Goals, including the reduction of pollution and inequalities, building resilience and transforming economies, and promoting transparent, participatory and accountable governance. For this to be achieved, it is necessary to adopt an integrated, holistic approach to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, recognizing the interlinkages between the various Goals and promoting cross-sectoral cooperation as well as cooperation between and within ministries.

32. When promoting the application of the Aarhus rights it is also important to ensure that this is done in a non-discriminatory way. All interested individuals, NGOs and other interested organizations should be offered equal and effective opportunities to participate in decision-making and access to information and justice in environmental matters, including in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

33. With this in mind several challenges should be addressed in the coming years:

(a) With regard to access to information there is a considerable lack of awareness and technical challenges that still need to be tackled. Information is key for any decision to be made, for building strong institutions (Goal 16), “educating” people (Goal 4) and changing consumption and production patterns towards responsible and sustainable choices (Goal 12). Modern electronic tools and social media are important for the dissemination of environmental information and for promoting education for sustainable development. Online tools can help raise public awareness on a number of Sustainable Development Goals, making complex issues such as climate change (Goal 13), biodiversity (Goal 15) or water and sanitation (Goal 6) understandable to the general public. Moreover, providing access to information, raising public awareness and providing the required education are important prerequisites for achieving goals and targets related to, for example, health (Goal 3) or disaster risk reduction (Goal 11). It is therefore necessary to work together to establish the necessary mechanisms for raising awareness and to disseminate accurate and understandable information on environmental matters. At a time when public access to information on environmental matters is challenged by different restrictions and barriers it is important to work together to increase transparency, to ensure that accurate, functional and reliable data and information are publicly available and easily accessible. The Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers plays a special role here;

(b) Challenges associated with sustainable development are best dealt with if Governments, NGOs, the public and other stakeholders work together to find the best sustainable options. Inclusive and effective public participation in decision-making is therefore critical for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals and has already shown its benefits. However, a lot remains to be done. For effective public participation to become a reality, for it to be a daily practice in all decision-making including on sustainable development, Governments need to ensure truly meaningful, inclusive and effective participation. Use of modern technologies should be promoted as they can help to embrace a wider audience. At the same time, all people, including the poor and persons and groups in vulnerable situations, should be given solid opportunities to get involved and their needs for participation in decision-making should be met. The role of younger generations is also important in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals — they should be stimulated to act and get involved, and should be provided with opportunities to make their voices heard;

(c) A sustainable future and the building of inclusive and just societies require due respect for the rights of every person who wishes to have access to information and express his or her view on any policy, project or other activity that may have an impact on the environment or his or her well-being. Most importantly, these individuals need to be protected against persecution, harassment or any other form of retaliation for their involvement. It is therefore extremely disturbing that NGOs and members of the public continue to face serious obstacles when trying exercise their rights. At the same time, it is both a comforting and promising sign that ECE is servicing the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol so that their inspirational work can foster environmental democracy and can serve as a model for achieving Goal 16.

34. In response to the challenges just outlined, all actors, including public authorities, NGOs, international organizations and other stakeholders, should mount joint efforts to

overcome the various barriers and clear all obstacles that prevent people from exercising their fundamental rights to access to information and review mechanisms and to be able to participate in decision-making and challenge decisions or omissions of public authorities that may have an impact on the environment or people's health and well-being.

35. Recognizing the shared objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with other international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, it is also vitally important to support the active role of Governments, international organizations, NGOs, the public and all other stakeholders, including youth, in the decision-making regarding and the implementation of all these international agreements. In this regard, the Aarhus Centres can build on the wealth of experience and knowledge gained over the years and serve as a platform to promote transparency and public participation in decision-making related to sustainable development.

36. The above considerations should guide action in the years to come. The representatives of Governments, international organizations, NGOs, academia and the private sector present at the meeting share the common goal of transforming our societies and building a sustainable future, and had an opportunity to showcase how they can contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through an inclusive and participatory process. This shared objective is essential for building the necessary synergies to promote environmental democracy in implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. We can also build on already well-established practice for promoting the principles of the Convention in international forums, as well as on the successful cooperation with a vast array of international partners.

37. The Budva Declaration, in conjunction with the outcomes of the thematic discussion and the background paper, "Your Right to Build a Sustainable Future: Aarhus Convention, its Protocol on PRTRs and the Sustainable Development Goals" (ECE/MP.PP/2017/18-ECE/MP.PRTR/2017/4), provide a solid basis for promoting transparency and accountability in other forums on environmental matters or sustainable development, including the follow-up to and review of the Goals by the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE region and by the high-level political forum on sustainable development globally.

III. Discussion and adoption of the Budva Declaration

38. Ministers and heads of delegation from Parties and signatories to the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol, together with representatives of other States, international, regional and non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians and other representatives of civil society throughout the ECE region and beyond, discussed and adopted the Budva Declaration on Environmental Democracy for Our Sustainable Future as amended at the meeting.

39. Participants took note of statements made, in turn, by representatives of Lithuania, Romania, Serbia, Guinea-Bissau, Slovakia, France, the European Union, Armenia, the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, OECD, Aarhus Centres, the Ecoforum of NGOs from Kazakhstan and Crude Accountability.

40. Mr. Kęstutis Navickas, Minister of Environment of Lithuania, welcomed the Budva Declaration and reported on actions undertaken in his country to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in partnership with civil society representatives. Recognizing the importance of taking into account the voices of the people when establishing national priorities, targets and indicators, Mr. Navickas expressed regret over cases of constant violations of the rights of the public concerned and environmental

activists in several countries and invited all the Parties, especially those in non-compliance with their obligations under the Convention, to respect the principles of transparency, openness and inclusiveness in environmental decision-making.

41. Ms. Grațiela-Leocadia Gavrilăescu, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Environment of Romania, noted that the improvement of access to information and public participation in decision-making was a key priority in Romania, and recognized the need to improve the training of officials in order to continue to implement the Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers. She further pointed to the complexity of achieving sustainable development, which involved multiple interconnected mechanisms for the prevention of environmental pollution, including pollutant release and transfer registers. Finally, Ms. Gavrilăescu underlined the importance of strengthening compliance with international norms as a necessary precondition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and to that end called for putting to good use the cross-cutting nature of the Convention and the Protocol.

42. Mr. Goran Trivan, Minister of Environmental Protection of Serbia, highlighted the importance of joint work and synergy between multilateral environmental agreements as a way to avoid duplication of efforts and the inefficient use of resources. He therefore invited all the countries from the region to actively and intensely cooperate towards achieving common goals. There was also a need to ensure effective communication and cooperation between stakeholders, including civil society, in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, by raising awareness of the benefits of investment in cleaner production and technologies that could considerably reduce the generation of hazardous industrial waste and the emission of pollutants into the environment. In that regard Serbia had established national environmental information systems based on the “open data” concept, thus making environmental information publicly available and easily accessible. Finally, there was a need to provide government incentives, build public-private partnerships and find new and innovative funding sources at the national, regional and global levels in order to achieve those common goals.

43. Recalling the vulnerability of Guinea-Bissau to the effects of climate change and other environmental challenges, Mr. Antonio Serifo Embalo, Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development of Guinea-Bissau reported on national actions to develop a coherent national environmental policy and to adopt and implement international legal instruments that aimed to support environmental protection. The country had a strong will to accede to the Aarhus Convention and much progress had already been achieved in expanding democratic principles in the field of environmental matters in Guinea-Bissau, through institutional and legal reforms. Finally, Mr. Embalo welcomed the Budva Declaration as a source of inspiration that would further enhance the application of all three pillars of the Convention.

44. Mr. Norbert Kurilla, State Secretary of the Ministry of Environment of Slovakia, underscored the role of the Budva Declaration in symbolically opening the door to a better and more sustainable future. The Sustainable Development Goals were cross-cutting and universal by nature, and despite differences between rich and poor economies or national goals and priorities, the ultimate goal for all nations remained the same: ensuring a decent quality of life in harmony with nature. It was therefore important to raise public awareness and strengthen cooperation at the regional and international levels to deal with ongoing problems related to sustainable development and to promote environmental well-being.

45. Welcoming the adoption of the Budva Declaration, the representative of France affirmed that the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol could usefully contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For its part, France had recently strengthened its measures for environmental democracy by adopting a major

reform in 2016 for the democratization of environmental dialogue, including through the modernization of procedures for increasing transparency of information and the effectiveness of public participation in decision-making, which were at the core of the Budva Declaration.

46. Speaking on behalf the European Union and its member States, Mr. Liiv expressed support for the Budva Declaration, which was the result of constructive discussions among Parties, signatories and stakeholders. Sustainable development was at the core of European Union actions, and access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters were essential components for realizing sustainable development. As the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals was only possible through effective and efficient stakeholder involvement, the European Union had set up an inclusive multi-stakeholder platform enabling all stakeholders to contribute with their best practices, policy recommendations and ideas.

47. The representative of Armenia stressed that the Budva Declaration had to become a starting point for new developments in environmental democracy and should be seen as a crucial step for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention through new and innovative approaches. It was time to prepare society for the complete understanding and effective implementation of the principles of the Convention, along with the principle of intergenerational equity, the involvement of all the nations in the implementation of the Convention and the acknowledgement of the idea of the rights of nature. Implementation of environmental democracy was an ongoing process. The implementation of the Aarhus Convention had led to tectonic changes in the system of social values and was exemplified by the development of legislation to facilitate public involvement in decision-making and access to justice.

48. Delivering a statement on behalf of the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, the Head of the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Team said that the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention were placed at the forefront of efforts to protect environmental rights around the world. The Aarhus Convention had become a regular point of reference for other initiatives, with countries of the Latin America and the Caribbean region close to finalizing an agreement on the application of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration. In addition, by implementing the Aarhus Convention States were meeting both their environmental and human rights obligations in a coherent manner. In conclusion, he underlined the urgency of taking immediate action to put an end to the harassment and killing of environmental human rights defenders and welcomed the Budva Declaration as a tool that could help provide better protection of those individuals.

49. The OECD representative welcomed the Budva Declaration and confirmed the organization's readiness to play a role, in close collaboration with ECE, as a source of expertise, data and good practices in establishing and implementing pollutant release and transfer registers.

50. A representative of the Dushanbe Aarhus Centre delivered a statement on behalf of all Aarhus Centres, stressing that, despite the fact that there were 60 centres in different cities and countries, they had a lot in common when it came to environmental protection. By providing a link between civil society and public authorities, the Aarhus Centres had been contributing to the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and to the promotion of environmental democracy. The Budva Declaration would reinforce the principle of transparency and facilitate public participation in achieving not only Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies, but all the remaining Goals and targets, by 2030.

51. While welcoming the Budva Declaration, a representative of Ecoforum of NGOs of Kazakhstan, speaking also on behalf of Crude Accountability (United States of America),

Ecohome and Green Network (Belarus), expressed serious concerns over the continuing human rights' violations, including the harassment, persecution and killing, of environmental activists, without whom the principles of the Convention would just remain on paper.

52. That call was also repeated by the representative of Ecohome, who urged Parties to respect environmental human rights and further called for urgent action to protect environmental defenders. Finally, she reminded Parties that were not in compliance to make progress in aligning their legislation and practices with the provisions of the Convention.

IV. Adoption of the decisions of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention

53. After the adoption of the Budva Declaration by participants at the Joint High-level Segment, the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention formally adopted the decisions it had provisionally agreed earlier at its sixth session.⁵

V. Closing of the meeting

54. In closing remarks, representatives of the European ECO Forum expressed deep regret over the non-compliance of the European Union with the provisions of the Convention, noting, however, that the integrity of the Compliance Committee was maintained. To conclude, they urged the European Union to listen to the feedback it had received at the Budva meeting and to swiftly take the measures needed to bring the European Union back into compliance. A further point raised by the European ECO Forum was the need for Parties to take the necessary steps to address, and to give priority to, cases of harassment of environmental activists, which took place, for instance in Belarus and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In conclusion it was underlined that for the Budva Declaration to have meaning it was important for Parties to turn words into action by providing the resources necessary to facilitate implementation of the relevant commitments.

55. In her closing remarks, the Executive Secretary of ECE expressed her gratitude to the Government of Montenegro for its generosity in hosting the meetings, and to UNDP and OSCE for their seamless support to the organization of the events.

56. The Minister for Sustainable Development and Tourism of Montenegro then closed the meeting, highlighting the role of the Budva Declaration in the promotion of environmental democracy and sustainable development.

⁵ For practical reasons, decisions adopted by the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention at its sixth session are being issued in an addendum to the report of that meeting (ECE/MP.PP/2017/2/Add.1).