

Sixth Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Aarhus Convention

Tuesday, 12 September 2017

Budva, Montenegro

Substantive Issues – Agenda Item 6 (d) Genetically Modified Organisms

Report by the Chair of the Round table

Thank you very much Madame Chair.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, honourable delegates, dear colleagues.

My name is Helmut Gaugitsch, I am working at the Environment Agency Austria in the field of land use & biosafety. As Chair of the second joint round table on public awareness, access to information and public participation regarding living modified organisms (LMOs)/genetically modified organisms (GMOs), I have the honour and pleasure to briefly report to MOP 6 of the Aarhus Convention the main outcomes of this activity.

As some of you may know, Austria has a long history of engaging in issues regarding GMOs and biosafety, in the context of the two instruments, the UN-ECE Aarhus Convention and its GMO Amendment as well as the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity. After having chaired previous similar events, Austria was very pleased to again have the honour to chair the second joint round table. This second Roundtable took place in Geneva from 15 to 17 November 2016, under the auspices of the UN-ECE Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol.

The round table was attended by delegates from a number of Parties to the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol, as well as from intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. The guidelines and legally-binding provisions on GMOs in the framework on the Aarhus Convention as well as the successful interplay with the Cartagena Protocol are a remarkable achievement in this particularly relevant area of biosafety and public involvement and therefore built the basis for the discussions at the round table.

During the round table sharing of knowledge, good practices and lessons learned on access to information, awareness raising and education, public participation as well as mechanisms for co-operation in the field of LMO/GMO area was successfully accomplished. It proved particularly useful to involve experts outside the UN-ECE region as the interplay with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and its Program of Work on public awareness, education and public participation (Article 23) played a strong and inspiring role in the discussions. In addition, an interactive element in the round table provided an excellent opportunity to network, hold bilateral discussions and select priority elements for further concrete actions.

The Roundtable results are summarized in the report of the Roundtable which is available as background document (ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2017/8) to this MOP.

The Chair`s summary at the end of the report contains all the recommendations on concrete steps for a way forward. In the interest of time, I will limit myself to highlight the key recommendations:

- Firstly, to continue to strengthen coordination and cooperation between national focal points of both the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol;
- Secondly, to make use of the Aarhus Centres or other relevant organizations with a view to strengthen the capacities of national authorities in order to ratify the GMO Amendment and the Cartagena Protocol;
- Thirdly, to make use of all available guidance material, especially the checklist of key measures developed in the last intersessional period, which are required for ratification of the two instruments;
- Fourthly, to provide training materials in order to assist Parties to integrate biosafety issues into other national policies and programs;
- Fifthly and very importantly, to develop a “pocket guide” describing the benefits and challenges to promote transparency and public participation in LMO/GMO related matters;
- And finally, to organize a similar round table in the next intersessional period of the two instruments and thereby support their implementation in the context of LMOs and GMOs.

I would like to make a strong call to those countries not having done so yet, to ratify and implement the GMO Amendment to the Aarhus Convention. I would also like to invite Parties to offer bilateral assistance and partner organizations (such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe-OSCE and the United Nations Development Programme - UNDP) to initiate country projects on capacity building related to GMOs/LMOs, aiming at ratification of the GMO Amendment and implementation of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol in synergy. In addition, yesterday on 11 September 2017, a side – event took place. I was organized by the two Secretariats and focused on “Building capacity for public participation to effectively implement the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the Aarhus Convention in the context of LMOs/GMOs”. The discussions there clearly identified the future need for concrete training activities in appropriate formats, such as e-learning tools, webinars, face-to-face meetings etc. Such capacity – building and training activities should be implemented and financed in bilateral and multilateral settings.

I would like to stress that the discussions at the Roundtable were very constructive, focused and results-oriented. I therefore would like to thank all the speakers and participants for their dedicated input to the Roundtable as well as to the Secretariats of the Aarhus Convention and Convention on Biological Diversity for their efficient and experienced organization of the Roundtable as well as the assistance during and after the event. It was a remarkable example of successful synergy, and it was my pleasure to work with all of you!

My assessment is that the Roundtable has again proved to be a very important milestone to further practical development and implementation of mechanisms for the public involvement in the area of GMOs and biosafety. Austria is honored to continue to lead the work on GMOs

during the next intersessional period, of course depending on the concrete activities and subject to budgetary approval.

Finally, I would like to underline that transparency, awareness raising, education and public participation in the context of biodiversity and biosafety is critical for the implementation of a number of Sustainable Development Goals and their targets – which is now a key global priority for UN Member States. I therefore would like to take this opportunity and strongly encourage Parties and other interested countries to participate in the next Round Table, which will inevitably address this matter.

Thank you, Madame Chair.