



**Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and to the Protocol on PRTRs,
Budva, Montenegro**

**Agenda item 6 (a) – Access to Information, including electronic information tools:
European ECO Forum keynote statement delivered by Ms. Mara Silina, Green Liberty
and European ECO Forum co-chair**

Public access to environmental information is an integral part of human rights and is regarded as an important aspect of public participation and achieving sustainable development. A public that is well-informed has a lot to offer the decision-making process by contributing a wide-range of opinions and views leading to the better decisions. This can both help identify more immediate and evident consequences of policy as well as potentially unforeseen effects, particularly those whose impact may not have become apparent in the short-term and might easily have gone without being detected until too late. Therefore, the continuous work of the Task Force on Access to Information is of a crucial importance. The European ECO Forum supports the work started by the Task Force on, among others, broadening the scope of environmental information, removing existing barriers in access to information, reviewing the application of restrictions on access to environmental information, active and effective dissemination of environmental information using wide range of electronic information tools and linking together activities of this Task Force with other international forums dealing with access to environmental information. We also welcome the initiative of the Task Force to update the Recommendations on electronic information tools to provide public access to environmental information adopted by the MOP in Almaty, Kazakhstan in 2005 (Decision II/3). We fully endorse the draft decision VI/1 on promoting effective access to information and look forward to its implementation during the next inter-sessional period.

Despite the ongoing work in the field of public access to environmental information and some progress achieved, there are a wide range of problems to be tackled urgently. Firstly, the right to access information under the Convention should be fully implemented and enforced not only formally (in theory and words) but in practice at all levels (international, national and local).

Secondly, it is necessary to develop and agree on a clear and broad definition of what is environmental information in order to prevent its often narrow interpretation by public authorities, business and media. In particular, commercial confidentiality should not be

used by applicants to prevent information being released - key to understanding environmental impacts in the decision-making processes. Privatised industries providing

public functions must also be open and transparent, and help to account by respective Governments to provide the requisite information.

There is a rather new demand for access to information regarding impacts of armed conflicts on the environment and human health, an issue, which may seriously alter sustainable development efforts in the region, including occupied territories.

Although the quality of information has improved over the last years, the problem of the reliability of information provided by authorities in some countries still exists. Issues also arise in the failures to adequately provide for proactive dissemination of information in accordance with the obligations, and to take advantage of technological advancements to facilitate greater and more timely access. In addition, there are cases when the information provided is too complex to be used by citizens (general public). But equally access to underlying data is essential to those concerned validation of analysis and conclusions. There are also some countries where public authorities charge high fees for providing environmental information upon request. This all needs to change and we request Parties and Signatories to the Convention to ensure that the information provided by authorities is reliable, trustworthy, user-friendly and, in most cases, free of charge, in particular, historical data. Under no circumstances the costs charged should aim at making the profit. Therefore, we would like to support the initiatives to promote re-use of environmental information, use of creative commons and similar copyright standards and access to primary statistical data on emissions.

Governmental authorities also should ensure that requested information is provided in a timely manner and step up their efforts to actively disseminate environmental information using modern electronic information tools and initiatives like e-government, Open Government Data Initiatives and others. The development of "one-stop portal" for environmental information would be a great achievement in linking together databases now based in different governmental bodies and agencies and enabling citizens and those interested in obtaining environmental information to find all necessary information without searching through tens or sometimes hundreds of different websites.

The European ECO Forum also wants to stress the importance of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) created by the European Environmental Agency (EEA) to improve the collection, exchange and use of environmental data and information across Europe. The SEIS helps simplify, streamline and modernise existing systems and processes, and makes them web-enabled. It is a decentralized, yet, integrated system that improves the quality, availability, accessibility and understanding of environmental information. We strongly encourage Parties and Signatories to the Convention to use it, CSOs and independent experts should be involved into all activities, starting from designing of national/ international systems, international cooperation as well as monitoring and control.

We also note ever growing role of on-line social networking for dissemination of information and facilitating dialogue among stakeholders on environment related issues.

Substantial efforts are needed in some countries to gather and disseminate health-related environmental information. Citizens have a right to know how environmental pollution affects their health.

The Clearinghouse mechanism, enabling the public to learn about the implementation of the access rights, is a good tool to enhance the impact of the Aarhus Convention. However, sufficient resources have to be allocated to maintain its quality and broaden its content.

Last but not least, the European ECO Forum wants to see expansion of the scope of the Task Force on access to information itself by inviting also those other than environmental authorities to join its work, as a lot of environmental information is held by non-environmental agencies and offices.

The European ECO Forum thanks the Republic of Moldova for its leadership of this Task Force.

Thank you for listening to me and the European ECO Forum is looking forward to a fruitful cooperation in the future to improve access to information.