

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CONSULTATION PROCESS ON ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THE AARHUS CONVENTION'S ALMATY GUIDELINES

Response provided by the UNECE Secretariat regarding the “Environment for Europe” process

The “Environment for Europe” process is a unique partnership of the member States within the UNECE region, organizations of the United Nations system represented in the region, other intergovernmental organizations, regional environmental centres, NGOs and other major groups.

Mr. Josef Vavrousek, Environment Minister of what was then Czechoslovakia, initiated the “Environment for Europe” process. The first Ministerial Conference took place near Prague, at Dobris Castle, on 21-23 June 1991. Four more conferences followed before the Belgrade Conference that will take place on 10-12 October 2007: the Lucerne (Switzerland) Conference, on 28-30 April 1993; the Sofia (Bulgaria) Conference, on 23-25 October 1995; the Aarhus (Denmark) Conference, on 23-25 June 1998; and the Kiev (Ukraine) Conference, on 21-23 May 2003.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, which has been closely associated with the “Environment for Europe” process since the beginning, serves as secretariat to the process.

1. Please provide any comments on the Guidelines, in view of your forum's own processes, activities and particular characteristics.

2. Does your forum have any formalized rules or procedures concerning access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters? If yes, please provide an overview.

The formal rules of procedures concerning public participation in decision-making within the “Environment for Europe” process are approved by the WGSO¹ prior of each of the Ministerial Conferences “Environment for Europe”. For reference please the part I, paras. 4-7 of the enclosed document of Organisational Issues for the Belgrade Conference (ECE/CEP/AC.11/2006/5) that was approved by the WGSO at its second meeting (29-30 June 2006).

Further, representatives of NGOs, RECs and other Major Groups are invited as observers to the WGSO and a senior representative of the European ECO-Forum is invited to participate as observer in the Executive Committee of the WGSO. For reference please see paras 5 and 8 of the Annex V to the Report of the 11th session of the CEP that took place on 14-15 October 2004 (ECE/CEP/124) providing the Mandate of the WGSO for the Sixth Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe”.

3. Does your forum have any non-formalized practices concerning access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters? If yes, please provide an overview.

Concerning the access to information and public participation in decision-making, all relevant documents during the preparatory process and the Conferences “Environment for Europe” are made available on the UNECE website (<http://www.unece.org/env/efe/welcome.html>) for information and comments, as relevant by the participating NGOs, RECs and other major groups' representatives.

4. Are there any current or future work plans of your forum that may affect the extent of or modalities for access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters? If yes, please provide an overview.

The “Environment for Europe” process fosters understanding and support of environmental progress, while promoting access to information and public involvement in environmental issues in the region. As a milestone event in this process, the Belgrade Conference provides an important

¹ The Ad Hoc Preparatory Working Group of Senior Officials is an intergovernmental group created for the express purpose of preparing for upcoming Ministerial Conferences “Environment for Europe” and for coordinating the follow-up response. Each WGSO is established by the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy upon the recommendations of the Ministerial Conferences.

platform for stakeholders to understand better the achievements, impacts and challenges of the process.

Following the request by the WGSO, on the basis of inputs from the member States as well as the EfE partners and in consultation with the host country a Communication Plan was developed aiming to raise public awareness of the issues addressed by the Belgrade Conference and to enhance its visibility. For reference please see the enclosed document ECE/CEP/AC.11/2006/13 adopted by the WGSO at its third meeting on 12-13 October 2006.

5. In particular, what kind of challenges, if any, has your forum encountered with regard to access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters (for example, low involvement of civil society, or practical difficulties in managing public participation)? If appropriate, please provide a description underlining those experiences you think could be most useful to consider when reviewing the relevance and practicality of the Almaty guidelines.

The major challenges are mostly related to the practical difficulties, i.e. (1) the financial constraints to support NGOs' active participation in relevant preparatory meetings and in the Ministerial Conferences "Environment for Europe", as well as the (2) limited capacity of meeting rooms.