

Measures taken at the national level to systematically promote public participation in international forums - Norway

Thank you Mr. Chair,

As stated in article 3, paragraph 7 of the Aarhus convention all Parties have an obligation to promote access to information and public participation in international forums.

As we have already heard in relation to the Rio +20 process, there are a number of different ways to fulfill this obligation. In extensive and high-profiled processes such as Rio+20 and the negotiations on climate change, the obligation is often complied with and measures carried out. As regards Norway for example, civil society representatives were part of the official Norwegian delegation to the Rio + 20 Conference, and have also been granted permanent representation with the official Norwegian delegation to the UN negotiation on Climate Change

The obligation of article 3.7 however, rests upon the Parties in relation to all international environmental decision making processes and within the framework of all international organizations in matters relating to the environment. This demands measures at the national level of a broader and more systematic character.

In this context, Norway would like to share our experience in establishing a consultative body of a general nature with the aim of supporting public participation in international environmental processes. The group was established by the Ministry of Environment, and is a standing, ongoing group that includes representatives of civil society, such as trade unions, NGOs and research institutes, together with representatives of the business sector. In addition to the Ministry of the Environment, which chairs the meetings, other Ministries such as the ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Energy and Petroleum participates at the meeting.

The group meets approximately four times a year, and has as its main focus issues relating to the European Economic Area (EEA), which constitutes a very important part of Norway's international relations. Other international environmental issues and processes are also discussed in the group, and the participants may propose items for the agenda at each meeting.

The purpose of the group is to increase knowledge on international environmental issues, and raise awareness within environmental organizations and others, of the impact of EEA and other international policies on Norwegian

environmental politics. The consultative body also constitutes a forum for providing inputs on global and international environmental issues and spreading information from international conferences and negotiations. This is especially important in relation to international processes in which the civil society is not represented as part of the delegation.

The consultation group is also a good place for the Ministry to give notice about upcoming or ongoing public hearings of proposed EEA acts concerning the environment. When deemed appropriate such acts should in accordance with the Norwegian Instruction for Official studies and reports be circulated for general review.

In addition, I should mention that group also serves a more “hidden” purpose for the Ministry of the Environment as regards our relations with other Ministries. As some of us may have experienced, environmental authorities are often more exposed to the views of NGOs than is the case at other ministries. Through this group however, we make sure that representatives from other ministries also meet and hear the views of the civil society.

Norway’s experience with establishing a standing consultative group of this kind, is that it provides useful input from the civil society in the preparations leading up to international negotiations and other processes. NGOs and others also often have information from their counterparts abroad which can be very useful, and vice versa be in a position to give input to international processes through their own international contacts. The feedback from the participants in the group is also that they find the meetings useful in order to be informed and hence to contribute even more actively in all international processes, not only the big once.

In general, civil society organizations are regarded as key players in policy formation and many other functions in the Norwegian society. Still, maintaining a high level of activity requires the economic recourses. To ensure this, the Ministry of Environment gives a 'core funding' for most large, national democratic environmental NGOs. We spend funds both nationally and internationally to make sure that environmental organizations stay active on the international scene.

So to sum up, work in relation to securing public participation in international forums is an ongoing process, and there are always potential for further work in this area. The standing consultative body which we have established is only one of several ways of securing public participation in all international forums.

Therefore, I am now very much looking forward to listen to the discussion here today, and get inspiration on how this is being done in other countries.

Thank you!