



Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention  
and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers  
Secretariat  
Environment Division  
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe  
Palais des Nations, Av. de la Paix 10  
1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland

Date: 23 October 2020

Dear Chair of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention,

Public participation in decision making and access to information, as encapsulated within the Aarhus Convention, has been holistically reflected across the structural and functional aspects of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its process. These principles play a key role in facilitating trust, raising ambitious and meeting commitments to drive transformational change. The UNFCCC process benefits significantly from the active participation of diverse stakeholders with a wide range of expertise in meeting the objectives of the Convention and the organization is therefore committed to ensuring an inclusive and transparent process, with the continuous support of Parties.

Accredited observers and stakeholders have different means to participate in UNFCCC processes and share their views and opinions. It is also important to note that all UNFCCC Constituted Bodies have developed or are in the process of developing rules of procedure that facilitate the participation of observers in their meetings. These bodies also include the principles of transparency and access to information within their rules of procedure and their reports and documents are made available to the public, subject to the requirements of confidentiality in specific cases.

This letter presents the updates and lessons learnt in the lead up to and during the twenty-fifth Conference of the Parties (COP 25) and preparations for COP 26 regarding access to information and public participation in decision-making through various observer engagement activities undertaken during the years 2019 and 2020.

The Chilean Presidency for 2019 and COP25 followed a path similar to that of the previous Presidencies, extending support for participation of NGOs at the Subsidiary Body meetings and at COP25. There were numerous challenges in the lead up to COP25, particularly during the latter part of the year when the venue changed from Chile to Spain. This change was unprecedented and involved a massive effort to move the conference and facilities to a different continent in less than a month, which presented immense challenges in logistics, communications and engagement of our stakeholders.

In particular, the following efforts were made by the Chilean Presidency, supported by the secretariat and the host country for COP25, Spain, during the year:

1. The Chilean Presidency organized several meetings with the observers during the mid-year sessions in June 2019 (SB50) and conducted consultations and briefings in the lead up to COP25. Several high-level delegates from the Chilean delegation participated, including one session that featured COP25 President and Minister of the Environment in Chile, Ms. Carolina Schmidt.
2. These meetings touched upon various aspects of public participation in decision making through engagement with civil society and accredited observers as well as ensuring access to information including logistical arrangements that were underway for COP25. The Chilean



Presidency provided clarifications to questions from observers and provided more information in due course where further consultations were needed. The Presidency also met with observers and civil society, virtually and physically, in Chile at other opportunities that presented themselves. These meetings helped gain more insight and gather views from civil society locally and abroad.

3. During November 2019, the host country of COP25 was changed from Santiago, Chile to Madrid, Spain following unrest in Santiago. Exceptional logistical arrangements were made in a short amount of time to facilitate the organization of COP25 at a similar scale as originally planned. These included several adjustments to the nomination/registration of delegates from civil society and observers, so that they were able to participate effectively at COP25 despite the change of venue.

4. In December 2019, COP 25 took place in Madrid, Spain. The UNFCCC secretariat continued to use the daily badge system that allowed observer organizations more flexibility in managing their participation, in particular observers could nominate additional delegates to attend COP25 for short periods during the COP within their assigned capacity. This allowed flexibility for observer organizations to change their delegates based on availability, which was particularly useful given the last-minute change of venue.

5. More than 130 new organizations were admitted as observers at COP 25, thereby increasing the number of admitted observer organizations to more than 2,500.

6. Based on best practices from the past, available venue facilities, feedback from stakeholders suggesting that the side events program become more focused, the number of official side events conducted by the secretariat at COP25 was more than 265. In addition, over 161 exhibits were facilitated by the secretariat which involved over 230 exhibiting organizations. The exhibition time was modified taking into consideration venue facilities and infrastructure given the change of venue.

7. Most negotiation meetings were open to observers. Sufficiently large meeting rooms allowed for participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to be facilitated with no additional ticketing for negotiation meetings. In general, most of the meetings did not require tickets to participate. Tickets were provided only in cases where seating capacity was limited, such as the opening meeting of COP25.

8. The “Open Dialogue”<sup>1</sup> between Parties and observer organizations was conducted by the Chilean Presidency during COP25. The COP President, Ms. Carolina Schmidt, chaired the discussion and facilitated the dialogue between Parties, observers and civil society.

9. In addition, the UNFCCC Executive Secretary has open communication with constituencies to explore further ways to enhance observer engagement in the UNFCCC process, in cooperation with various presiding officers in the UNFCCC process

10. A new initiative to engage local civil society from the host country was introduced by Chile, with support from the secretariat, which enabled local civil society organizations that do not hold observer status to attend COP25. More than 200 local Chilean organizations applied and were

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<sup>1</sup> Open Dialogue: The Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI), at its forty-sixth session in May 2017, extensively discussed “opportunities to further enhance the effective engagement of non-Party stakeholders with a view to strengthening the implementation of the provisions of decision 1/CP.21” under the agenda item arrangements for intergovernmental meetings (AIM). Please refer to FCCC/SBI/2017/7 paragraph 119(b)



given special one-time access for participation during COP25. With the change of COP25 venue to Madrid, a similar initiative was quickly launched in Spain, resulting in more than 100 local civil society organizations and NGOs being granted special one-time access for COP25. Registration for these delegates was completed with support from constituency focal points. The overall initiative was well received as it enabled a broader participation from civil society.

In 2019, the interest and participation of observers showed the significance and the key role that civil society and observers play in the climate change process. Despite the change of venue, the scale of the COP25 conference was similar to past COPs, and the number of observer delegates continued to grow. The secretariat issued more than 8,500 observer badges, which includes participation of NGOs, IGOs, civil society and UN agencies. In addition, over 1,500 delegates attended the SB50 sessions held in June 2019, where similar opportunities to showcase the work of civil society were provided.

One key element to participation of observers in the climate change process is accessible meeting space during SBs and COPs, in particular, for the daily constituency meetings. While this was challenging at COP 25 due to the last-minute switch from Santiago to Madrid, the secretariat nonetheless was able to offer meeting room space in most cases, which included at times changes to meeting rooms. The secretariat constantly strives to improve its processes and practices to facilitate better and more enhanced observer participation and hopes to address these challenges going forward.

In 2020, in light of the COVID 19 pandemic, a number of meetings of constituted bodies, mandated and non-mandated events, workshops and dialogues had to be conducted by virtual means, in the interest of public health and safety. The meetings of the constituted bodies that were held virtually remained open to observers in accordance with their respective rules of procedure, ensuring that the access to information and continued participation of observers was retained despite the change in format. Moreover, from 1 to 10 June 2020 a series of virtual events were conducted under the guidance of the chairs of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) and the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) and with the support of the UNFCCC secretariat, for which observers and other stakeholders were invited to participate. These online events provided an accessible platform for Parties and other stakeholders to continue their engagement through constructive dialogue, sharing views and building knowledge to maintain momentum in climate action. Building on the success of the June momentum, another series of “Climate Dialogues” have been planned for November 2020 to facilitate further engagement in an inclusive and transparent manner, with the active participation of stakeholders and observers to the UNFCCC.

Lastly, we would like to highlight that, at the upcoming SB52, the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI), under the SBI agenda item ‘Arrangements for intergovernmental meetings’, Parties will continue to discuss the engagement of observer organizations and other non-Party stakeholders in the UNFCCC process.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Hafida Lahiouel'.

Hafida Lahiouel  
Director  
Legal Affairs Programme  
UNFCCC