

Statement by Ms. Valentina Tapis
Chair of the Task Force on Access to Information
Aarhus Convention Working Group of the Parties
Twenty-fourth meeting
Geneva, 1–3 July 2020

Wednesday, 1 July, 10.45 a.m.— 11.45 a.m.

(see the Chair's Note:

http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/pp/wgp/WGP_24/AEC/Inf.1_Chair_s_Note_AI.pdf)

Good morning, dear Colleagues! Greetings from Chisinau!

I am pleased to bring to your attention (1) the outcomes of the work undertaken by the Task Force on Access to Information; (2) a progress in the development of the 2005 Recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools set out in decision II/3 of the Meeting of the Parties; and (3) possible directions of the future work in this area.

On the first item, the work of the Task Force in the current intersessional period focused on the areas identified in decision VI/1 of the Meeting of the Parties on promoting effective access to information and built on the outcomes of the discussion at the respective thematic session of the Working Group of the Parties at its twenty second meeting in June 2018.

At the sixth meeting in October last year, the Task Force promoted the exchange of information, case studies and good practices and discussed recent and upcoming developments focusing on active dissemination of environmental information. In particular, the Task Force discussed effective provision of information in case of an imminent threat to human health or the environment, the use of modern technologies by the public and the update of the Recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools.

In the ensuing discussion, the Task Force highlighted:

- the importance of transparency and effective risk assessment in the event of any imminent threat to human health or the environment and provision of the information held by a public authority immediately and without delays to the members of the public who may be affected to enable them to take measures to prevent or mitigate harm;
- the benefits of the use of the established emergency telephone numbers, radio emergency networks, media, including traditional media and social media, portals and mobile applications used for the routine dissemination of environmental information to provide information to the public in case of emergencies as appropriate in accordance with the needs of different users;
- the importance of addressing the use of modern digital technologies and the provision of environmental information by the public (e.g. citizen science, lay, local and traditional knowledge, other citizen engagement initiatives);
- Recent developments regarding the reporting on the state of the environment, electronic public records, the use of Copernicus and other Earth Observation systems, big data, health-related information.

The Task Force requested to address all these issues in the updated Recommendations on electronic information tools.

The Task Force also took stock of developments with regard to public access to information related to: emissions; the application of restrictions on access to information; and the protection of whistle-blowers and other persons exercising their rights in conformity with the provisions of the Aarhus Convention.

Additionally, the delegates had many takeaways and strengthened their capacities in promoting open data for the environment in the workshop organized in cooperation with the Convention's long-standing partner – the European Environment Agency - back-to-back with the sixth Task Force meeting.

The outcomes of the meetings aim to support countries' efforts in implementing, monitoring and measuring environment-related Sustainable Development Goals. The Task Force invited Parties to take additional measures to address the challenges in collecting and sharing the data for environment-related SDG indicators and to consider the use of data resulted from the Earth Observation and Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers for this purpose as relevant.

The lessons learned during the meeting and followed impact of the COVID-19 pandemic testing countries' resilience proved the need to step up the work and investment in the digital transformation addressing environmental challenges, supporting transition to circular economy and closing the digital divide at the same time.

In this regard, the next meeting of the Task Force in November this year is expected to focus on **access to environment-related product information** and continue work on the next draft of the updated Recommendations and follow up on the recent developments as needed.

Moving to **the second item**, I would like now to highlight **the progress in the preparations of the updated Recommendations** on the more effective use of electronic information tools.

The update of the Recommendations is carried out through a participatory process with the view of submitting them to the Working Group of the Parties at its twenty-fifth meeting in 2021 for possible approval and further submission to the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention for its consideration at the seventh session in 2021.

The draft updated Recommendations aim to support the implementation of the Convention in synergy with other relevant international commitments, such as environment-related Sustainable Development Goal and targets, the Paris Agreement, other multilateral environmental agreements, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, several Human Rights Council resolutions, and relevant pledges under the framework of the World Meteorological Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme, the “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference and the Group on Earth Observations. Lastly, they aim to enhance knowledge-sharing and technology transfer to overcome digital divide that critically limits the potential benefits and the applicability of such tools.

The draft includes the recommendations on general policy, priority types of information and its accessibility, tools and infrastructure, engagement of the public, operators and other interested stakeholders, governance and capacity building, and the Convention's Clearinghouse mechanism. They are accompanied by supporting explanatory notes. The draft takes into account the developments regarding the Shared Environmental Information System, geospatial information management, Earth observation data, e-government, open government data, reuse of public sector information and other relevant initiatives and recent technical developments.

Parties, Signatories, other interested States Members of the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, academia and other interested stakeholders were invited to participate in the consultation on the update of the Recommendations in advance of the sixth meeting of the Task Force by submitting case studies and drafting proposals. The Task Force discussed the outcomes of the consultations and took note of further comments and proposals presented at the meeting and sent afterwards by 1 November 2019.

Following the first round of consultation, the draft updated Recommendations took into account:

- (a) The drafting proposals, case studies and comments received;
- (b) The summary report on the results of the survey on the implementation of the recommendations on electronic information tools in 2016;
- (c) The outcomes of the discussion by the Task Force at its sixth meeting and the Workshop on Open Data for the Environment;
- (d) The outcomes of the capacity-building activities carried out by the Parties and partner organizations.

The next round of the consultation on the draft updated Recommendations was carried out in advance of the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties. The draft updated Recommendations were further revised taking into account the comments received.

I thank very much all interested Parties and stakeholders that shared their valuable experience and rich expertise through the consultations and kindly invite Parties and stakeholders to provide input and comments on the next draft by 30 September 2020.

On the third item, I suggest that Task Force will continue support countries' efforts in implementing, monitoring and measuring target 10 SDG 16 (Ensure Public Access to Information) in conjunction with other environment-related Sustainable Development Goals, including SDGs 3 (Health), SDG 6 (Water), SDG 11 (Resilient and Sustainable Cities), SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

In particular, the substantive issues to be given particular priorities in the next intersessional period could include:

- (a) Active dissemination of environmental information with focus on sharing experience regarding:
- the implementation of the updated Recommendations on electronic information tools;
 - the use of modern technologies by the public;
 - provision of information to the public authorities by third parties routinely and in case of an imminent threat to human health or the environment;
- (b) Public access to environmental information with focus on:
- scope of environmental information in accordance with the Convention;
 - application of restrictions on access to environmental information in accordance with the Convention;
 - access to environment-related product information;
 - access to information on emissions into the environment.

Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to all experts from Parties, partner organizations and stakeholders that support the work of the Task Force throughout these years in delivering the results and look forward to meet you in November this year.
