



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

24th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention (virtual), 1-3 June 2020

Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is pleased to attend the 24th meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and expresses its appreciation to the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat for the organization of this virtual event under the current circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The OSCE, the world's largest regional security organisation with 57 participating States, recognizes a close connection between environment, stability, democracy and peace, and therefore it aims to strengthen environmental co-operation as part of its comprehensive approach to security.

The effort to prevent conflicts and build trust and confidence at all levels includes the promotion of good environmental governance as a tool to achieve sustainable development and environmental protection. The support provided to the participating States for the implementation of essential Multilateral Environmental Agreements like the Aarhus Convention is an important aspect of this effort, and one of the main outcomes is the establishment and operation of the "Aarhus Centres" and the "Public Environmental Information Centres".

The Aarhus Centres are actively involved in all the three pillars of the Convention thanks to their multiple role of raising public awareness on environmental issues, disseminating environmental information, helping citizens exercise their rights and participate in the decision-making on environmental matters, and assisting governments in implementing the Aarhus Convention. They also serve as a platform to engage citizens, governments and the private sector in addressing environmental challenges.

Since 2002, the OSCE - both the Secretariat and Field Operations - has been supporting the Centres' activities on the ground and promoting the coordination and exchange of experiences and best practices through the Aarhus Centres Network. As of today, the network counts several dozen members in 15 different countries in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and it is still growing, as shown by the first Aarhus Centre in North Macedonia and the Aarhus Centre in Zenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) opened in 2019.

Dear Participants,

Every year, the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, in collaboration with the OSCE Fields Operations, organizes the Aarhus Centres Annual Meeting, that brings together representatives of the Centres, National Focal Points to the Aarhus Convention,

international organizations, NGOs and civil society. The last meeting, in October 2019, focused on the interlinkage between the Aarhus Convention and the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment. The event devoted particular attention to the public participation in environmental assessment and to the Aarhus Centres' engagement in implementing the Espoo Convention and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, and I take this opportunity to thank the UNECE for the fruitful collaboration in conducting the annual meeting.

The meeting also promoted a constructive discussion on the challenges to enable access to information and an effective public participation in environmental assessment processes. The Aarhus Centres had the opportunity to share their experiences in organising public participation processes under the environmental assessment procedures, as well as to analyse the necessary actions to increase their engagement in establishing effective environmental assessment systems in their countries.

The next Aarhus Centres Annual Meeting should take place in October in Tajikistan. If circumstances will not allow for conventional events, we will consider the opportunity to turn it into a virtual meeting.

Regarding the support to build legal expertise on the environment, I would like to mention that last year the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina implemented a semester-long Environmental Legal Clinics Programme for university law students.

Excellencies,
Dear colleagues,

The OSCE has committed to promote equal rights and opportunities for women and men in order to achieve stability and security, and is devoting continuous efforts to make all the Aarhus Centres initiatives fully gender-sensitive and gender-responsive. In this context, our Office is updating the guidelines on "Gender Mainstreaming in Aarhus Activities" in order to assist Aarhus Centre staff, stakeholders and practitioners to effectively integrate a gender perspective into their work.

The Aarhus Centres can also play a significant role in involving youth in the decision-making process on environmental matters and in strengthening the role of young women and men within their communities, and there are many examples of initiatives conducted by Centres that envisage the active participation of schoolchildren, students and youth networks.

In conclusion, I would like to underline the Aarhus Centres' contributions to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the significant impact on the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals, in particular to those referring to environmental protection, water management, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, as well as gender mainstreaming, inclusive societies and access to justice.

The OSCE is strongly convinced that the Aarhus Centres can contribute to strengthening stability, peace and security, thanks to their capacity to build trust and confidence within and across borders, and therefore will continue to support the activities of the Centres, to facilitate their engagement at international level and to increase their role in enhancing transboundary environmental co-operation.

Thanks for your attention.