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**REPORT ON THE WORKSHOP ON ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS
 TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION ON
 ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-
 MAKING AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS IN
 SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE¹**

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¹ This document was not formally edited.

Introduction

1. The Workshop on Electronic Information Tools to Support the Implementation of the Aarhus Convention in South-Eastern Europe was held from 25-26 November 2010 in Skopje, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The event was organized by the secretariat, pursuant to Decision III/2 (ECE/MP.PP/2008/2/Add. 4) in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC).

2. The aim of the workshop was to foster the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in South-Eastern Europe (SEE) by promoting the use of EITs. The Workshop targeted public officials (policy makers and information technology (IT) specialists) as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to spread information about the most up-to-date IT applications and share good practice examples of using electronic tools on environmental matters. Relevant authorities with political and technical responsibilities, as well as representatives of civil society and experts from participating countries shared information, learned from each other and discussed solutions to existing deficiencies in relation to the use of EITs.

3. Main objectives of the workshop were to:

(a) Build capacities on the use of EITs when implementing Aarhus Convention requirements for those authorities responsible for providing access to environmental information, issuing permits and licenses that affect the environment and that are therefore subject to public participation procedures, adopting environmental plans, programmes and policies, and providing access to justice in environmental issues.

(b) Promote the implementation of existing good practices and recommendations.

(c) Facilitate the exchange of experiences.

(d) Provide responses to specific and practical implementation questions, and

(e) Train participants or offer expertise on how to use and contribute to the Aarhus Clearinghouse mechanism.

4. The workshop was attended by representatives of four Parties, namely Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

5. The Aarhus Centre in Kragujevac (Serbia) and the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of Kosovo – UN administered region, S.C: Res. 1244 also participated.

6. The following non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions were represented: Ecotim (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Environmentally Responsible Action (ERA) group (Kosovo – UN administered region, S.C. Res. 1244), Florozon (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Citizen's Association Front 21/42 (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Biosfera – Center for education, environment and nature protection (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Go Green (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Centre for electronic communication – EKONET (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), EkoForum (Serbia), CEKOR – Center for Ecology and Sustainable Development (Serbia), BlueLink Information Network (Bulgaria), Institute for Electronic Participation (Slovenia), Public-I (United Kingdom), Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (Hungary) and Research Institute on Judicial Systems (Italy).

7. In addition, several organizations were connected through Skype: United Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), GRID-Arendal – United Nations Environment Programme, Center of Registers and Info systems (Estonia), Dialogue by Design (United Kingdom) and Provincie Gelderland (the Netherlands).

I. Opening of the meeting

8. The Minister of Environment and Physical Planning of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia opened the meeting and welcomed the participants.

II. Main topic areas

9. Using an interactive format of presentations (Skype conference facility), discussions and hands-on training on the Aarhus Clearinghouse mechanism, the workshop provided a comprehensive guidance to new technological challenges and available interactive devices to foster the implementation of the Aarhus Convention.

10. The following subjects were discussed under every pillar of the Convention, showing several top-down as well as bottom-up initiatives under each of the subjects:

1. Access to Information

11. The first session of the Workshop - **Access to information** – aimed to answer the following set of questions:

- How to establish the flow of information under the institutional framework to feed the environmental website.
- How to create meta-info systems in order to help people in requesting information.
- Tips to create a website that is regularly and easily updated.
- How to create persona-led infosystems.
- Tools to allow easy and low cost management of contents.
- How to deal with e-information requests when there are legal procedures for ordinary written procedures; i.e.: register of e-requests.

12. During the first session several *governmental initiatives* were presented by (a) the Environmental Information Centre of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, by (b) the persona-led info system “My living Environment” www.gelderland.nl/mijnleefomgeving taking place in province Gelderland, The Netherlands and by (c) the online reporting facility www.servis48.si in Slovenia.

13. The online reporting facility www.service48.si arouse the biggest interest among these three above mentioned presentations. Participants asked about the motivation of the local municipality to run such a demanding initiative for citizens reporting on problems which need to be fixed in the territory of the municipality, such as not collected garbage, roads/pavements in bad conditions, traffic lights out of order, misused public parks, etc.

14. According to the presenter of the Institute for Electronic Participation (INePA), many discussions were taking place in Slovenia about the standards of administration

and how to involve citizens in the local management issues. The municipality regarded such type of reporting facility as useful for their work because it accumulated engagement of and information from citizens that helped to improve the performance of the municipality.

15. The online reporting to the municipality was made 3-4 times per day and there was one person employed by the municipality who primarily handled the input given by citizens. For more complicated and complex issues there was a network of employees of the Municipality who could help solving the issues being reported. In case of environmental issues, the person managing the portal redirected the problem reported to the appropriate institutions.

16. Transparency issues were problematic as there was no clear strategy about enhancing the transparency and no written feedback that could track how citizens' requests/proposals had been taken into account or implemented.

17. There was also no method to evaluate the quality of the service and to assess its effectiveness.

18. In conclusion, it could be said that this initiative served as an exemplary case of how citizens provided information to a public authority and also how citizens were using EITs to improve their living environment.

19. *Bottom-up (citizens) initiatives* related to the access to information were presented by (1) the Virtual Assistant in province Gelderland, the Netherlands, and by (2) the online platform Save the forest (www.spasigorata.net) in Bulgaria.

20. Intensively discussed initiative "Save the forest" - online platform for alerts on illegal logging - was presented by BlueLink, the organization that runs a nationwide environmental information network and facilitates information exchange among NGOs, citizens and institutions for the last twelve years.

21. The platform had involved government authorities, NGOs and media but had been temporarily stopped as BlueLink did not get support from the new government for further operation.

22. Eventually around 10% of the reported cases about illegal logging were taken up by the forest agency and ended up with imposing sanctions. The problem was that the state forest agency was uncertain to decide whether the reported case were legal or illegal. The same problems occurred also in other SEE countries.

23. The public was engaged in the online platform through social networks, through media, press releases, etc. and it was very easy to engage and mobilize citizens in that way.

24. It was concluded that this platform was also a good tool to aid law enforcement and access to justice. BlueLink was encouraged to show their expertise to other prosecutors and enforcement agencies, police or judges not only in Bulgaria but also abroad. This tool could be easily used in other countries for monitoring/discovering illegal logging and also for other pollution related environmental crimes.

25. REC had a project under the Initiative on Environment and Security (ENVSEC) for SEE that could be used for promoting these types of platforms.

26. According to BlueLink the NGO community had lots of other similar ideas although not enough resources to put them into practice.

27. Geographic Information System (GIS) data based positioning had been used in Estonia and Slovenia for finding out illegal waste dumps and cleaning them up. In Estonia the state would have spent 22 million Kroons (15.6 Kroons = 1 Euro) to collect all the illegal garbage but the citizens initiative did it for half a million Kroons and in shorter time (half a day), so that eventually lot of resources can be saved when modern technologies are used. More about this initiative available from: www.letsdoit.org

2. Public Participation

28. The second session of the Workshop – Public Participation – aimed to answer the following set of questions:

- How to set up national e-participation platforms in order to hold electronic dialogues between authorities and citizens.
- How to combined e-participation and social networking platforms.
- What to bear in mind when an e-participation takes place.
- How to combine the e-procedure with the ordinary procedure: challenges and positive aspects.
- How to provide capacity building to users and civil servants.
- How to make sure that everyone entitled to participate can have e-access to the procedure.
- How to make the participation procedure user-friendly.
- How to take into account outcomes of the e-participation procedure and how to inform better about decision/s made by the authority responsible.

29. **Governmental initiatives** were presented using the example of online consultations organized on nuclear issues in UK. Dialogue By Design presented a specific consultation on nuclear issues as well as an overall methodology for online consultations. Participants found it very comprehensive and useful.

30. Online consultations on nuclear activities in UK were initiated by officials as an open process which did not target or exclude anyone. The invitation was intended to reach as many people as possible. In addition to media announcements, about 2,000 people were directly invited. Additional marketing was done to outreach to the general public.

31. In order to make the comments/inputs credible, the name of the person who made the comments was made public. At the same time a huge amount of problems regarding data protection arose, so that there should have been an option for people for opting out.

32. Overall, 25,000 people answered on-line. Five percent had supported the newly built facility; fifty-three percent supported nuclear power in general. Public reactions were negative and sometimes hostile but government expected it. The government

already had a policy but they had to consult it because they wanted to legitimize this policy and get some public support.

33. The presentation made by Public-I about how to combine social networking with more traditional e-tools was of great value for the participants.

34. E-petitioning was also discussed. Many questions rose after the presentation of the Slovenian citizens' initiative Citizen's forum which invites citizens to get involved and give inputs into the agenda items of the European Parliament.

35. As a result of the citizens' forum, the level of the European decision-making was well known in Slovenia. Unfortunately, there was no similar online forum at national level and at local level the situation is even worse as there is no local e-democracy strategy yet.

36. There was no e-democracy/e-participation strategy within the environmental ministry. The government had been taken some steps to enhance civil dialogue.

37. Many participants expressed their interest and readiness to learn more about on-line forums and its operation. Some NGOs in the sub region were about to open similar online platforms. For example, the former Yugoslav Republic Macedonia NGO Front 21/42 was about to open a public participation web site and service as there was very limited official information about planning projects, integrated permits and other decision-making processes where the participation applies.

38. The INePA representative expressed that according to the Slovenian experiences if an NGO started any participation initiatives it was quite soon followed by the government. Then, participants discussed that it was necessary to develop and disseminate recommendations of good practices to help to deal with on-line consultations problems. They thought that these issues could be brought to the attention of the Task Force on Public Participation in decision-making under the Aarhus Convention.

39. It was mentioned as symptomatic that on-line and off-line consultations often had very similar problems and new tools instead of solving those problems created additional ones. For example, when there was a gap between the people who have access and who have knowledge to contribute.

40. The representative secretariat of the Aarhus Convention informed participants about ongoing preparations for the adoption on a Code of Good Practice on Information, Participation and Transparency in Internet Governance developed under the Internet Governance Forum by the UNECE, the Council of Europe and the Association for Progressive Communications². In addition, she invited participants to use the Recommendations on the More Effective Use of Electronic Information Tools to Provide Public Access to Environmental Information adopted by the Parties to the Aarhus Convention in 2005³.

² Draft code is available at: <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/related.htm>

³ Text of the recommendations is available at:

<http://www.unece.org/env/documents/2005/pp/ece/ece.mp.pp.2005.2.add.4.e.pdf>

3. Access to Justice

41. The third session of the Workshop – **Access to Justice** – aimed to answer the following set of questions:

- Free online jurisprudence data basis and benefits of access to justice.
- Examples on how to keep the public informed on their Aarhus rights.
- Examples on how administrative decisions are also made available on line providing the public and promoters with information and knowledge on how authorities deal with issuing permits, licenses or authorizations.

42. As it was difficult to identify good examples on the application of EITs to access to environmental, the discussion took place after the intro to the subject prepared by the representative of the Research Institute on Judicial Systems who explained why was so difficult to use ICT in access to justice and his views on how to promote it.

43. The presentation on the Estonian E-file system stirred many questions about the technical set-up, security and infrastructure issues.

44. The representative of the secretariat informed participants that the jurisprudence database on access to environmental justice will be available as of December 2010 at the Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy:

<http://www.aarhusclearinghouse.org/>

4. e-PRTR

45. The forth session of the Workshop was dedicated to the e-PRTR. After the presentation made by the representative of UNITAR many comments and questions arise, including how to present the PRTRs in a more user-friendly way, who should control that the data was presented in time and with good quality, and how the public can participate in the development of the system.

46. To achieve a more user-friendly set-up of PRTR the speaker suggested the use of graphs, maps, tables and analyses. She highlighted that the quality of the information should be checked by the national authorities in charge of the PRTR. She added that human resources were needed to ensure monitoring of the data that usually were undertaken using technical resources. She explained that if the authority was not sure about the validity of the data, inspections should undertake to check it.

47. Finally, she stressed that public participation was not an option but an obligation according to the PRTR Protocol. The public as well as other stakeholders, including the industry, should participate in the development of a PRTR that was why she considered so important that they understand the benefits of using PRTR.

5. International and Regional Programmes, Funding

48. The international and regional programmes and funding possibilities for ICT and public participation were discussed under the fifth session. Issues discussed included a recommendation to seek opportunities through the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-13) and bilateral cooperation.

6. Hands-on training on the Aarhus Clearinghouse

49. The Workshop ended with a hands-on training session on the Aarhus Clearinghouse conducted by GRID-Arendal, where participants learnt how to contribute to the mechanism publishing their own information and recourses.

III. Conclusions

50. Participants underlined the need to continue building on the outcomes of the workshop. It was suggested the preparation of recommendations on how to improve the use of EITs in public consultations and the need to work together with the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making. Work should take into consideration a host of material already produced under the Convention and in other forums. Participants considered that many of the initiatives presented during the Workshop (e-petition, monitoring of illegal logging, etc.) should be promoted in the region and beyond. Finally, it was also stressed the importance of maintaining regular contacts among participants and with the National Focal Points of the Aarhus Convention and of the PRTR Protocol.

51. The programme, background materials and presentations are available at the UNECE website (www.unece.org/env/pp/electronictools.htm).
