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### Aarhus Convention



## Maastricht meetings in the spirit of a people-centred post-2015 development agenda

As the international community embarks on charting the way for an ambitious post-2015 development agenda with new Sustainable Development Goals, the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (Protocol on PRTRs) already provide an essential framework for Governments to effectively engage different stakeholders in decision-making, thereby offering solutions for truly sustainable governance.

The two treaties will hold a series of back-to-back meetings next week: namely, the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention (MOP-5) and the second session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs (MOPP-2). The events are being organized in Maastricht, the Netherlands, at the invitation of the Dutch Government, from 30 June to 1 July and from 3 to 4 July 2014, respectively, with a joint High-level Segment (HLS) on 2 July.

At these meetings, Parties are expected to discuss global promotion of the two treaties and agree on a number of decisions to guide their implementation for the next three years, including future strategic plans and work programmes.

At the joint High-level Segment Parties to both instruments will reaffirm their political commitment to the principles of participatory environmental democracy by adopting a Maastricht Declaration. This joint declaration, calling for greater transparency, will be yet another milestone in the Aarhus journey towards environmental decision-making that makes a truly positive difference for the living conditions of present and future generations. The document can be regarded as a regional contribution to a people-centred post-2015 development agenda.



**47 Parties to the Aarhus Convention**



**33 Parties to the Protocol on PRTRs**

*"This treaty's powerful twin protections for the environment and human rights can help us respond to many challenges facing our world, from climate change and the loss of biodiversity to air and water pollution. And the Convention's critical focus on involving the public is helping to keep governments accountable."*

Ban Ki-moon,  
Secretary-General of the United Nations

### What they are saying...

UNECE Weekly spoke to some of the leading lights of the Maastricht meetings to learn their views about the current state of play of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol and their hopes for the future:



**Her Excellency, Wilma Mansveld, Minister for the Environment, Netherlands**

*At a time when financial considerations often take precedence over the protection of human rights and the environment, what in your view has been the added value of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs?*

The protection of human rights and the environment are vital for our societies. The Parties to the Aarhus Convention and the PRTR Protocol can be called to account if they infringe or undermine these basic public goods. The Aarhus

principles are an important instrument in striking the right balance between people, planet and profit. We mustn't forget that the Aarhus Convention is still the world's only legally binding international agreement on environmental information, participation and justice. The Convention and its Protocol are effective tools for furthering environmental democracy, and essential to promoting a sustainable future.

*In what ways does the Maastricht Declaration respond to contemporary environmental and social challenges?*

A great deal of progress has been made since the Aarhus Convention was adopted in 1998. But societies change and we have to keep up with new challenges, new trends and new technologies. There is more public participation in environmental debates and more people have access to environmental information than 16 years ago. Use of the Internet and new technologies — like smartphones that measure air pollution — has contributed to the increase in public information, awareness and participation. We call this important new development "citizen science". Moreover, corporate activity is now more transparent, and companies are aware of the economic opportunities that green innovations and investment offer. The Convention reflects these changes; the Maastricht Declaration calls upon the Parties to achieve that. New features of the Maastricht Declaration should include protection of environmental activists and whistle-blowers, adequate product information and the use of social media. These are three crucial elements of a modernized Aarhus Convention and PRTR Protocol, which I call "Aarhus 2.0".

*What's next? What's the future of the Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs? What should be the main priorities for the near future?*

A lot of progress has already been achieved since the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention. But there is still a lot of work to be done. After the Maastricht Declaration is adopted, we should focus on honouring in practice our existing international commitments. But we also have to find a way to cope effectively with the new developments I just mentioned. At the same time we need to work on keeping things simple, because we don't want to undermine the commitment of the Parties to the Convention and the Protocol or of the companies affected by them. You may go faster if you travel alone, but if you travel together you go farther.



**Mr. Jit Peters, Chair of the Meeting of the Parties of the Aarhus Convention**

*At a time when financial considerations often take precedence over the protection of human rights and the environment, what in your view has been the added value of the Aarhus Convention?*

Although it's hard to cite concrete evidence for this, I think that without the guarantees of the Aarhus Convention Governments would be able to cut expenditures in the fields of access to information, access to justice and public participation more easily. Often Governments tend to think that those guarantees are more of a luxury and do not see the links with human rights. In the framework of the Convention, citizens and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are able to protest against diminishing such guarantees by government in those fields.

*In what ways does the Maastricht Declaration respond to modern environmental and social challenges?*

I think that the Maastricht Declaration responds to three challenges. Firstly, it opens the way for citizens to get more information about the environmental effects of products. In short, product information is what we want. Secondly, we want better protection for environmental activists, including whistle-blowers. Lastly, through the Declaration we recognize the role social media can play in the protection of the environment.

*What's up next? What is the future of the Convention in your view? What should be the main priorities for the near future?*

The Convention can play an important role in the transition of our current top-down democracy to a more bottom-up one — let's say, a more horizontal, participative democracy. Representative democracy will be complemented with a watchdog democracy. Citizens and NGOs can play the role of watchdogs protecting our environment. The Convention is a living document which can play a leading role in this transformation.



**Mr. Michel Amand, Chair of the Meeting of the Parties of the Protocol on PRTRs**

*At a time when financial considerations often take precedence over the protection of human rights and the environment, what in your view has been the added value of the Protocol on PRTRs?*

In these difficult times for our economies, impacting people and

governments as well as the private sector, innovation and measures to improve environmental performance can make a difference and offer new opportunities for industry. In that sense, the information delivered to the public by the Protocol on PRTRs gives those companies engaging in a transition towards sustainable development an opportunity to demonstrate their efforts.

*In what ways does the Maastricht Declaration respond to modern environmental and social challenges?*

As was reiterated by Heads of States at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference) Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, issued 20 years earlier, is more than ever a cornerstone for building the future we want. The Maastricht Declaration reminds us how the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol are therefore powerful tools for the Parties to follow up on the outcomes of Rio+20 and thereby help us to face modern environmental and social challenges.

*What's up next? What future do you see for the Protocol on PRTRs?*

The Maastricht Declaration identifies potential ways to develop the Protocol in future. But what is still a priority for me is to ensure that its objectives and current requirements are implemented by more UNECE member States. To do so, cooperation between the Parties and capacity-building are more than ever needed, as well as looking for synergies across the multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). In addition, discussions will also be needed among the Parties and within UNECE in order to ensure a more stable and predictable financing of the Protocol's activities.



**Mr. Jonas Ebbesson, Chair of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee**

*What have been the main achievements of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Mechanism?*

The Compliance Committee has maintained its integrity; that is an achievement. Another achievement of the Compliance Committee has been to help keep the Convention alive, by independently reviewing the performance of Parties, by influencing their implementation and the jurisprudence of courts, and by affecting the public debate on the issues covered by the Convention.

*In what ways does the Maastricht Declaration respond to modern environmental and social challenges?*

I appreciate that it recognizes the importance of protecting environmental activists and whistle-blowers, and freedom of speech. I also think that the call for greater transparency in relation to information concerning products and product-related decision-making is crucial, and quite modern too. Finally, of course I welcome the acknowledgement of the compliance mechanisms and the explicit intention to strive to further increase the effectiveness of the compliance mechanisms.

*What's up next? What is the future of the Convention in your view? What are the main challenges ahead and what should be the main priorities for the near future?*

One such challenge, of importance for the future of the Convention, is for the Parties to live up to the assertion in the Maastricht Declaration, that "the economic crisis should not be seized as an excuse to cut down on environmental protection and procedural rights". In a rather different respect I see transboundary public participation as a challenging issue that will receive increasing attention in the near future.



**Mr. Alistair McGlone, Chair of the Compliance Committee of the Protocol on PRTRs**

*What are the main conclusions following the completion of the first period of implementation of the Protocol by its Parties?*

The Protocol is a complex and technical instrument; full implementation and compliance requires detailed legislation and a sophisticated regulatory system. Some Parties have found this challenging, and we should build on the encouraging international cooperation that has already taken place in order to help them to deliver their obligations.

*In what ways does the Maastricht Declaration respond to modern environmental and social challenges?*

I have been a keen observer of, and participant in, discussions about environmental democracy since the early 1990s, when I was one of the core negotiators of principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration. It is splendid now to see the linkages between the output of the Rio+20

Conference — “The Future We Want” — and to see how ministers link good governance and a truly sustainable economy with Aarhus and the Protocol.

*What's up next? What is the future of the PRTR in your view? What are the main challenges ahead and what should be the main priorities for the near future?*

The Protocol will bring the most added value at the international level if it is complied with; we should concentrate on consolidating our achievements and ensuring the international PRTR regime is healthy and strong.



**Ms. Mara Silina, NGO Coordinator, European ECO Forum**

*At a time when financial considerations often take precedence over the protection of human rights and the environment, what in your view has been the added value of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs?*

Democracy and human and environmental rights do not and should not depend upon money. Lack of political will is the main obstacle to delivery of these rights, rather than financial costs. The Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs get society one step closer to democracy and makes sure these rights are for everyone.

*In what ways does the Maastricht Declaration respond to modern environmental and social challenges?*

The Maastricht Declaration recognizes the importance of participatory and transparent governance, and the necessity to protect environmental activists, whistle-blowers, freedom of speech and the safe participation of citizens in decision-making. It also points out the importance of using modern communications tools, social media and mobile devices for improving transparency and providing information, including those concerning pollutants and product-related policies. Even if the text is not perfect, we wish the Maastricht Declaration to become a reality after the Meeting of Parties.

*What's up next? What is the future of the Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs? What should be the main priorities for the near future?*

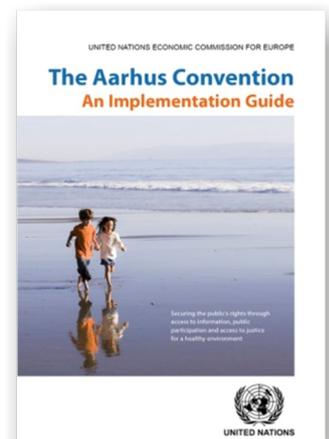
Full implementation of both instruments by all Parties is crucial. Further development of the Aarhus Convention is also necessary to address a number of weaknesses that have been identified in the 16 years since it was adopted. We would also like to see the further development of the Protocol on PRTRs to embrace broader sustainability issues, and welcome the fact that the Maastricht Declaration points in this direction.

### Hot off the press



The secretariat recently published a quick guide to the Aarhus Convention — Protecting your environment: The power is in your hands — a promotional brochure on the Aarhus Convention. The brochure will be made available in the six official United Nations languages. An electronic version (so far, only in English) is accessible from [http://www.unece.org/env/pp/publications/the\\_power\\_is\\_in\\_your\\_hands.html](http://www.unece.org/env/pp/publications/the_power_is_in_your_hands.html); printed hard-copy versions can be requested from the secretariat.

The Aarhus Convention: An Implementation Guide has been updated in the light of the decade of practical experience gained in the Convention's implementation since the first edition. The publication will be made available in the three official UNECE languages. An online version of the Guide is available from <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/publications/aig.html>; printed hard-copy versions can be requested from the secretariat.



## Meeting highlights

### Building partnerships

A range of stakeholders play an important and ongoing role in supporting the implementation of the Convention and its Protocol, due to the treaties' cross-cutting nature. To this end, the Convention is working with a number of partners to build synergies. These include the United Nations system organizations and agencies, the secretariats of other MEAs, international financial institutions and intergovernmental organizations, as well as NGOs, Regional Environmental Centres, academia, the judiciary and Aarhus Centres.

### Ensuring compliance

The Compliance Committees of the Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on PRTRs are important tools to assist Parties in implementing the requirements of the Convention and its Protocol. Both Compliance Committees are non-confrontational, non-judicial and consultative mechanisms and, very specially, allow for members of the public, as well as Parties and the secretariat, to bring compliance issues before them.

Next week the Chair of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee will report to the MOP on compliance issues raised since the Parties' fourth session (Chisinau, June 2011). The MOP will review progress made by Parties to implement the decisions on compliance adopted at the fourth session concerning Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Moldova, Slovakia, Spain, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. It will also consider the findings of non-compliance adopted by the Compliance Committee during the 2011–2014 intersessional period concerning Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the European Union (EU), Germany, Kazakhstan, Romania and the United Kingdom, and the progress made by those Parties in implementing the Compliance Committee's recommendations. In this respect, the Chair of the Compliance Committee will report to the MOP that Denmark, the Republic of Moldova and Slovakia are no longer in non-compliance and the MOP will consider new draft decisions on compliance regarding Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, the EU, Germany, Kazakhstan, Romania, Spain, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

The Chair of the Protocol on PRTR's Compliance Committee will report on the outcomes of the synthesis report prepared for the Protocol's first reporting cycle, highlighting developments and obstacles encountered by Parties in implementing the Protocol.

### Replicating the achievements of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol

Parties welcome the initiative on developing a regional instrument on environmental rights in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the establishment of PRTR systems around the globe.

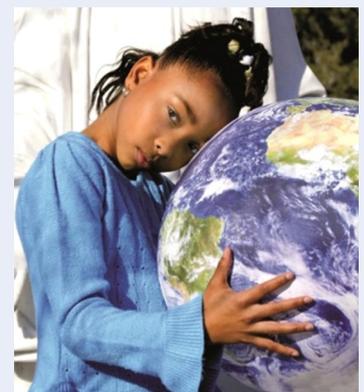
Representatives from the Latin America and the Caribbean will report on the latest developments following the Declaration on the application of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, which aims to promote the rights of the public in environmental matters based on regional consensus and with the participation of civil society.

### Promoting the application of the principles of the Convention in international forums

There is an increasing understanding in the international community of the challenges faced and the good practices employed by international forums with respect to public participation, through further sharing experience gained under the Convention with international forums. At MOP-5, Parties will review experience and acknowledge the progress made by Parties, international organizations, international financial institutions, NGOs and other stakeholders in furthering the application of the Convention's principles, by considering and adopting a draft decision on promoting the application of the principles of the Convention in international forums. The decision will also guide the work of the secretariat, keeping in mind the increasing number of requests from interested international forums seeking expert assistance from the secretariat and Parties on this topic.

### Promoting the Protocol in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia

Complex technical requirements of the Protocol pose a challenge for countries with economies in transition. To promote the Protocol in countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Parties will be invited at MOPP-2 to endorse a proposal on activities for the promotion of the Protocol on PRTRs in these countries, which sets an overall framework for possible areas for bilateral and multilateral cooperation.



*Not an official record - For information only*

### Welcoming new Parties

For a number of Parties Maastricht is the first time they will be attending a session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP):

**3 Aarhus Convention**  
Iceland, Ireland, Switzerland

**8 Protocol on PRTRs**  
Cyprus, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Slovenia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

In addition, the amendment to the Convention on public participation in decisions on the deliberate release into the environment and placing on the market of genetically modified organisms (GMO amendment) was ratified by Ireland and Switzerland since the fourth session of the MOP.

*We welcome the new Parties joining the Aarhus family!*

## The buzz

### Side events

The meetings will serve as a platform for knowledge sharing that contributes to the aims of the Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on PRTRs by providing the opportunity to organize side events.

Some fifteen side events will take place in Maastricht. These side events will address a number of topics, such as: the role of the Aarhus Convention as a driver for democracy in international negotiations; the role Aarhus Centres play in advancing the implementation of the Convention; building peace through access rights; building partnerships between regions with a focus on Principle 10 and the Aarhus Convention; and the importance of effective access to environmental information.

### Live broadcast of the HLS and tweeting

Not coming to Maastricht?

You can still listen to the discussions of the HLS which will be broadcast live. The thematic session of the HLS will consist of two panels: the first, on the issue of the right to information and environmental democracy; the second, on the issue of the right to information and social media. The live broadcast of the HLS will be available from the website <http://www.aarhusmaastricht.org>.



You are also invited to join the discussion by sending tweets to #AarhusMaastricht, #AarhusConvention and #PRTRProtocol.

### "Elevator pitch" student contest & event's app

A student contest is being organized by the host country. Students have been invited to make a short video in which they give their views on one of two questions:

- 1. In the context of the Aarhus 2.0 era, when and how should citizens participate in decision-making and implementation processes?*
- 2. How can "the wisdom of crowds" be used in dealing with environmental issues? How does this wisdom compete or interfere with the wisdom of experts?*

The videos will be published by the students through YouTube and will be judged in Maastricht on 1 July. The winning videos will be shown at the HLS.



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In addition, the host country has developed an app with all practical information for the Maastricht meetings. This is the first time an app has been developed for Aarhus meetings. Delegates can open the app by accessing <http://m.twoppy.com/Aarhus/> or by downloading twoppy app from the webshop and then searching for Aarhus.

Additional information:  
UNECE website of the meetings  
<http://www.unece.org/env/pp/aarhusmop5&prtrmop2/main.html>

Host country website of the meetings:  
<http://www.aarhusmaastricht.org/>

For any additional information contact the secretariat at:  
[aarhus-prtr-mops@unece.org](mailto:aarhus-prtr-mops@unece.org)

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