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Meeting of the Parties to the
Convention on Access to Information,
Public Participation in Decision-making and
Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

Working Group of the Parties to the Convention
(Sixth meeting, Geneva, 5–7 April 2006)
(Item 7 of the provisional agenda)

**REPORT ON THE FOURTH MEETING OF THE TASK FORCE
ON ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS**

1.   The fourth meeting of the Task Force on Electronic Information Tools established by the Meeting of the Parties (decision I/6) was held in Geneva on 7–8 November 2005.

2.   The meeting was attended by experts designated by the Governments of Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Denmark, France, Georgia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Malta, the Republic of Moldova, the Netherlands, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Spain, Tajikistan, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, as well as the Commission of the European Communities and the European Environment Agency.

3.   The United Nations Environment Programme/GRID (UNEP/GRID) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) were represented.

4.   The following international non-governmental and regional organizations were also represented: European ECO Forum, European Environmental Bureau and the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC CEE).

5.   The following national non-governmental organizations were represented: BlueLink Information Network (Bulgaria), ECOM Center–St. Petersburg Society of Naturalists (Russian Federation), Environmental League (Georgia), GEMBA–European ECO Forum (Georgia), Greenwomen–Environmental News Agency (Kazakhstan), OrangeNet Foundation (Republic of

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Moldova), StrawberryNet (Romania), Teta "Khazri" (Azerbaijan) and Union for Defence of the Aral Sea and Amudarya (Uzbekistan).

6.   The meeting was also attended by representatives of Global Legislators Organization for a Better Environment–Europe (GLOBE–Europe) and the Russian Environmental Federal Information Agency (REFIA).

I.   OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ELECTION OF OFFICERS

7.   The meeting was opened by Mr. Jeremy Wates, Secretary to the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on behalf of the secretariat. Mr. Christopher Jarvis was elected Chair by consensus.

8.   The Chair welcomed the participants and invited nominations for a Vice-Chair to the Task Force. The position of Vice-Chair remained unfilled.

9.   The representative of the European ECO Forum thanked the Government of Norway for the financial support it had provided enabling additional civil society representatives from the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia region to attend the meeting.

II.   ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

10.   The Task Force adopted the following agenda for its work:

a)   Opening of the meeting
b)   Election of the Chair and Vice-Chair(s)
c)   Adoption of the agenda
d)   Relevant outcomes of the Second Meeting of the Parties
e)   Relevant global, regional and national developments and processes
f)   Capacity-building activities
g)   Review of draft guidance for the Clearing-house Mechanism
h)   Innovative use of electronic information tools in processes under the Convention
i)   Follow-up to decision II/3 on Electronic Information Tools and the Clearing-house Mechanism
j)   Any other business
k)   Adoption of the report and close of the meeting.

III.   RELEVANT OUTCOMES OF THE SECOND
MEETING OF THE PARTIES

11.   The Chair reported on the relevant outcomes of the Second Meeting of the Parties, held on 25–27 May 2005, including the adoption of decision II/3 on Electronic Information Tools and the Clearing-house Mechanism (ECE/MP.PP/2005/2/Add.4) and, in particular, the extension of the mandate of the Task Force contained in the decision's third paragraph and the

recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information systems to provide public access to environmental information.

12.   The secretariat called attention to provisions of decision II/7 on the Work Programme for 2006–2008 adopted at the Second Meeting of the Parties (ECE/MP.PP/2005/2/Add.11), which, *inter alia,* called for workshops for national contact points for the Clearing-house Mechanism to be organized.

IV.   RELEVANT DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES

13.   The Chair invited participants, as well as the secretariat, to inform the Task Force of relevant activities they were engaged in and examples of good practice from their countries or regions. The plenary presentations highlighted the use of electronic information tools by both public authorities and NGOs in providing access to environmental information and facilitating public participation in environmental decision-making.

14.   The secretariat informed the meeting that a panel on "Capacity building for Electronic Information Tools and the Environment", co-organized by UNECE's Environment and Human Settlements Division and the United Nations Environment Programme's Division on Early Warning and Assessment, would be held as a side event to Phase II of the World Summit on the Information Society, which was to take place in Tunis on 14 November 2005. The event would serve to highlight the recommendations adopted as an annex to decision II/3 by the Meeting of Parties to the Convention.

15.   The World Resources Institute presented recent developments concerning the Access Initiative and the Partnership for Principle 10. The Access Initiative, a global initiative of civil society organizations, is preparing the second version of its indicator-based tool to assess government law and practice in the implementation of principle 10 at the national level. The tool contains 148 web-based indicators to gauge governments' principle 10 performance. It is scheduled for release in April 2006.

16.   The Partnership for Principle 10, one of the Type-II partnerships launched at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, is comprised of more than 25 governments and non-governmental and international organizations committed to principle 10 *inter alia* through exchange of information, sharing of best practices, and recognition and promotion of the implementation of principle 10 in international agreements. The World Resources Institute, which serves as the secretariat to the Partnership, requested the secretariat to identify and recommend specific actions that would maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the Aarhus Clearinghouse and a global database that is being developed by the Partnership.

17.   The secretariat reported on relevant aspects of the Partnership for Principle 10's Committee of the Whole meeting, held in London (United Kingdom) on 4–5 October 2005. The Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy, which provides an Internet portal to information on all principle 10 activities, could serve as a useful contribution to the Partnership. Some Task Force experts expressed support for cooperation within the Partnership on tracking relevant global activities and commitments related to principle 10 through the Aarhus Clearinghouse.

18.   The European Environment Agency introduced the EEA Neighbourhood Project, which seeks to develop an extensive geographic Internet portal to regional and selected local information. The project's objectives are to enable members of the public to locate information about their surrounding environment, and to improve the visibility of, and public access to, information providers. A prototype containing flood risk information had been developed and tested in three focus groups representing the public and professional users of geographic information. The EEA will employ a strategy of stepwise construction of the neighbourhood system with parallel thematic approaches and will seek to overcome discovery, knowledge and language barriers identified during the early phase of the project. Drawing upon World Health Organization standards, the project will incorporate real-time air quality (i.e. ozone) and key health impact data.

19.   The delegate from Ukraine presented the national website of the Ministry of Environment Protection of Ukraine, which includes an Aarhus Information Centre and interactive public dialogue features.

20.   REFIA (Russian Federation) presented a web portal from the North-Western Federal District of the Russian Federation which had been designed to serve as a model national node of the Aarhus Clearing-house Mechanism as well as provide information on other relevant multi-lateral environmental agreements. The website had been developed as a joint venture by UNEP/GRID, REFIA and the Swedish Environment Agency. A special feature of the technology deployed by the portal is its ability to update environmental information automatically culled from other websites maintained by government agencies, thus reducing the cost of maintaining the system.

21.   Bluelink Information Network (Bulgaria) demonstrated a newly developed Web platform used to elect NGO representatives to official public commissions and working groups in Bulgaria (www.bluelink.net/vote).

22.   Greenwomen–Environmental News Agency (Kazakhstan) reported on a distance learning course being developed jointly with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on UNESCO websites in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The course includes a module on the Aarhus Convention covering environmental legislation, policy and government and nongovernmental programmes supporting the Convention's implementation in Central Asia.

23.   ECOM Center (Russian Federation) demonstrated an index of public participation development in Russia which drew upon requests submitted by users to Yandex, a popular Russian-language Internet search engine. The index uses key words related to public participation opportunities in that country to gauge development in this field (www.ecom-info.spb.ru).

24.   The Chair previewed an electronic public consultation Web tool developed by the Environment Agency of England and Wales. During its pilot phase, residents in southwestern England will be able to gain electronic access to waste licensing documentation. At selected sites, members of the public will be able to register to be electronically notified of applications for licensing of waste management sites in their community and to submit public comments

online, thereby encouraging dialogue between the public, waste managers and local authorities over waste disposal siting decisions.

25.   The Chair thanked the experts for their informative demonstrations and noted the potential application of the Access Initiative and Partnership for Principle 10 methodologies to tracking progress in implementing electronic access to priority categories of environmental information, following the recommendation contained in paragraphs 9 and 10 of the annex to decision II/3, in line with user needs. He recommended that the European Environment Agency seek to further identify user needs, distinguishing between professional, commercial and public users, in its Neighbourhood Project.

V.   CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

26.   The secretariat briefly reported on progress with the development and use of the Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy (http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org). During its first year and half of operation, more than 250,000 visits had been logged on the Clearinghouse's website. At the time of the meeting, 17 national nodes had been identified as operational; a further three national nodes were announced at the meeting. The secretariat proposed modifying the Clearinghouse website to highlight capacity-building resources and facilitate the exchange of information between partners involved in capacity-building activities.

27.   The secretariat proposed that two workshops be held to build capacity for national nodes of the Clearing-house Mechanism, noting that such workshops were specifically included under activity VIII in decision II/7 on the Work Programme for 2006–2008, adopted by the Second Meeting of the Parties. The first workshop would be held in English at the REC CEE in Szentendre, Hungary, in early 2006, with a second workshop in the Russian language to follow in the EECCA region at a later date.

28.   The Chair invited experts to contribute to a general discussion on the specific objectives and expectations for the proposed programme of capacity-building workshops for effective use of electronic information tools in accordance with decision II/3. The scope of capacity-building activities to be undertaken in the programme of capacity-building workshops referenced in decision II/3 was questioned by some experts. It was noted that countries were at different stages of development of electronic information and therefore would benefit from different types of training and sharing of experience. However, the Chair pointed out that having countries with more extensive experience in the provision of electronic information on the environment attend the workshop could prove beneficial to those countries with lesser experience.

29.   It was agreed that national needs in this area should be assessed through a questionnaire, to be developed and circulated by the secretariat to national node administrators and other experts. The information gathered would be used to prepare the workshops. NGOs would also be invited and their capacity to participate as providers of information to the Clearing-house Mechanism assessed. To avoid duplication of effort, REC CEE offered to review its existing materials on NGO capacity in this area.

30.   As follow-up to the meeting, the secretariat was asked to consider whether further research into capacity-building needs should be conducted before the first workshop was held. The

secretariat was also asked to prepare a prospectus on the first workshop and circulate it to the Task Force members for comment.

31.   The Task Force welcomed the development of capacity-building resources in the Clearinghouse.

VI.   REVIEW OF DRAFT GUIDANCE FOR THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

32.   The Task Force was invited to discuss the draft document "Draft Guidance for National Nodes of the Aarhus Clearing-house Mechanism" which had been prepared by the secretariat. The guidance is intended for use in training national administrators responsible for the development and maintenance of the Convention's Clearing-house Mechanism. Comments on the draft guidance focused on clarifying its intended audience (national node administrators) and intended purpose, namely building capacity for the exchange of information on legislation and practice through the central node but also building national capacity to communicate effectively with different stakeholders and the public. Experts drew a distinction between these purposes, and it was agreed to restructure the material contained in the guidance accordingly.

33.   The Task Force welcomed the preparation of the guidance document. Some experts felt that the draft guidance was overly prescriptive, and they emphasized that countries should have flexibility in developing their nodal points according to current structures and identity already on the Web as well as to their human and financial capacity. The guidance should be considered a broad framework under which countries could add value to their existing systems. Some experts suggested that the guidance document should focus more on the interface between providers of information and national nodes and that the Clearing-house Mechanism should be developed to make initiatives and national practices comparable across national nodes.

34.   The Task Force discussed ways of ensuring the quality of information and legal responsibility for the inclusion of information in the Clearinghouse. Some experts thought the responsibility for ensuring the quality of information lay primarily with the providers (authors and publishers) and not with national node administrators, who could potentially be overburdened by this responsibility. Some experts suggested that users be invited to rate the usefulness of information found in the Clearinghouse. The Chair concluded that information sources should be clearly identified and contact information relating to these sources provided.

35.   The secretariat noted that official United Nations legal disclaimers appeared on the Clearinghouse website and recommended that similar disclaimers be included on national node websites, in accordance with national legal standards.

36.   Noting the need for further national consultation, the experts from France and Spain placed a "general reserve" on the draft guidance text, and the Chair took note of their reservations.

37.   It was agreed that the secretariat, taking into account the comments made, would prepare a new draft of the guidance document. It was also agreed to trim background information and place technical details pertaining to the operation of the Clearinghouse in an annex. This draft

will be circulated among the experts for further comment before being submitted to the meeting of the Working Group of the Parties in April 2006.

VII. INNOVATIVE USE OF ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS

38.   The secretariat reported that an electronic reporting Web tool developed by UNECE to support submission of national implementation reports had not been used by any member States during the first reporting cycle.

39.   UNITAR reported on the use of the PRTR Virtual Classroom in 2005 by the secretariat in preparation of guidance material in support of the UNECE Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTR), as well as by experts preparing a national PRTR in Chile and by Russian-speaking experts in Central Asia and the Russian Federation. Experience gained during the pilot phase had provided UNITAR with insight on how to improve Virtual Classroom services. UNITAR invited all Virtual Classroom participants to answer a brief survey in order to provide feedback on the Virtual Classroom's pilot phase. Additional resources were needed to continue operation of the Virtual Classroom in 2006.

VIII. FOLLOW-UP TO DECISION II/3 ON ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS AND THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

40.   The meeting briefly addressed the need to monitor the implementation of the recommendations annexed to decision II/3 and ways of avoiding the duplication of work. The secretariat was asked to develop a questionnaire to assist with monitoring implementation of the recommendations before the next meeting of the Task Force. The secretariat was further requested to contact the Green Spider Network secretariat to explore synergies with that organization's objective to provide a platform to exchange professional knowledge about the communication of environmental information in the European Union and neighbouring countries.

IX. CLOSE OF THE MEETING

41.   No points were raised under any other business. The Task Force entrusted the Chair and the secretariat with finalizing the text of the report. The Chair thanked all participants for their contributions and closed the meeting.