1. The Task Force on Access to Information in the past three years focused its work on the exchange of information, experiences, challenges and good practices in promoting effective access to environmental information and use of electronic information tools. The work undertaken to date resulted in taking stock of further legal, technical and institutional developments, identifying emerging issues and suggesting the way forward.

2. The majority of the Parties established their legislative and regulatory frameworks for implementing the first pillar of the Convention on access to environmental information. Such frameworks differ between Parties striving to balance Freedom of Information, Freedom of Environmental Information and relevant sector-based legislation. While it was widely recognized that processing individual public requests for environmental information is a time- and resource-consuming service by public authorities, there was a shift and policy development towards the collection and production of environmental information in electronic form and the effective dissemination of or providing open access to this information to the public.

3. The Recommendations¹ adopted through decision II/3 of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention in 2005 identified the ways of more effective use of electronic information tools to provide public access to environmental information. Nevertheless, since then dynamic changes in supply and demand of environmental information beyond these Recommendations have required constant monitoring and policy updates by the Parties to the Convention.

4. With uneven but continuously increasing Internet-user penetration, mobile-broadband and fixed broadband subscriptions, use of social media and further advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs), there is increasing public demand for up-to-date, accurate and easy-to-find environmental information of various types, aggregation and quality to be provided through web-based and mobile-based applications. There is also a growing interest in linked, geo-referenced, real-time and ready-to-reuse environmental data and information.

5. While the volume of environmental information, the speed of its production, the number of producers and the dissemination of information are continuously increasing, some challenges in legal, institutional and infrastructure frameworks preclude effective public access to environmental information. These challenges were identified through 2017 national implementation reports, Compliance Committee findings of a systemic nature and a survey assessing the implementation of Recommendations adopted through decision II/3 (see document ECE/MP.PP/WG.1/2017/4 and its accompanying document AC/WGP-21/Inf.2²).

¹ See http://www.unece.org/env/pp/mop2/mop2.doc.html#/ (see document ECE/MP.PP/2005/2/Add.4)
² See http://www.unece.org/env/pp/aarhus/mop6_docs.html (tab intersessional docs)
6. To address these challenges and monitor new developments, the Task Force provided a valuable platform by bringing together experts from governments, civil society, academia, international forums and other stakeholders to exchange experiences regarding the identified challenges and suggest follow up actions and measures to address them.

7. Pursuant to decision V/1 adopted by the Convention’s Meeting of the Parties at its fifth session (30 June- 1 July 2014)\(^3\), the Task Force addressed a number of issues, produced outcomes through reports, background documents, statements and presentations and identified priorities and follow up actions regarding the following subjects:

(a) The scope of environmental information and its provision of environmental information by the different public authorities (addressed at its third, fourth and fifth meetings);

(b) Associated costs (addressed at its fourth meeting);

(c) Quality of information (addressed at its third and fourth meetings);

(d) Comparability of the environmental information (addressed at its third meeting);

(e) The application of restrictions on access to environmental information (addressed at its third, fourth and fifth meetings)

(f) Active dissemination of environmental information (addressed at its third, fourth and fifth meetings), including through:
   - Monitoring and supporting the implementation of the recommendations in decision II/3 and the development of the Shared Environmental Information System across the region;
   - Monitoring technical developments and, where appropriate, contribute to other initiatives relevant to access to environmental information;
   - Collection of the good practice case studies\(^4\);

(g) Further development of the Aarhus Clearinghouse for Environmental Democracy and PRTR.net (addressed at fourth and fifth meeting).

The way forward

8. While looking ahead, it is important to recognize that effective public access to environmental information remains crucial for the successful implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 16 and its target 16.10.

9. To contribute to this process and advance the implementation of the first pillar of the Convention, the Task Force would continue its work as mandated through decision IV/1 of the Meeting of the Parties to be adopted at the current session focusing on effective protection of whistle-blowers and environmental activists, active dissemination of environmental information, public access to information of particular types, further population of the Aarhus Clearinhouse and the application of restrictions on access to environmental information.

10. The Task Force would continue to take stock of further developments and lessons learned from a number of global, regional and subregional processes of relevance to the first pillar of the Convention, including 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development\(^5\), Shared Environmental Information System in the pan-European Region, E-government, Open Government Data, Data Revolution, Global Earth Observation Data and Global Geospatial Information Management (including GGIM:Europe and European Union INSPIRE Directive) initiatives, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

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\(^3\) Available from http://www.unece.org/env/pp/aarhus/mop5_docs.html#
\(^5\) Target 16.10, which calls for ensuring public access to information in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
2015-2030, initiatives to improve nationwide systems of pollution inventories or registers, environmental monitoring and reporting and EU Directive on Re-use of Public Sector Information.

11. The Task Force should remain a platform where various international forums dealing with issues related to public access to environmental information (UNECE WGEMA, UNEP, OECD, GEO, WHO, HRC, WTO, and IPCC) could learn advantages of the relevant obligations under the Aarhus Convention and match their expertise on the modernization of data policy and electronic information tools in geospatial, statistical and other spheres relating to the environmental matters, and discover complementarities in their work and experience.

12. There are a number of policy issues that would deserve attention of national focal points. It is therefore will be important to discuss them at the level of the Working Group of the Parties.

13. The Republic of Moldova remains committed to lead the Task Force on Access to Information in the new intersessional period and invites other Parties, signatories, other interested States, international and other organizations to participate in, support its work and continue sharing the case studies on electronic information tools.

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6 Adopted at the Third UN World Conference in Sendai, Japan, on 18 March 2015