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## Economic Commission for Europe

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

#### Seventeenth meeting

Geneva, 26-28 February 2014

Item 8 (f) of the provisional agenda

**Other substantive preparations for the fifth session of  
the Meeting of the Parties: declaration**

### **Draft elements for the Maastricht Declaration<sup>1</sup>**

### **Transparency as a multivitamin for environmental democracy**

**Prepared by the Bureaux of the Meetings of the Parties to the  
Convention and its Protocol under the leadership of the  
Bureaux Chairs**

#### *Summary*

The present document was prepared by the Chairs of the Meetings of the Parties to the 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, with the assistance of the secretariat. This is in accordance with the decision of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention at its fourth session (Chisinau, 29 June–1 July 2011), in which it tasked the Working Group of the Parties and the Bureau with the preparation of substantive documents for the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties (see ECE/MP.PP/2011/2/Add.1, decision IV/6, annex I,

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<sup>1</sup> This document was submitted late owing to its late receipt by the secretariat.



item X).

As agreed by Parties, the draft declaration constitutes a short and focused policy-oriented document, which strives to communicate the key messages regarding the importance of transparency for furthering environmental democracy and the commitment of the Convention's and Protocol's Parties in this regard. It is expected that all the specific substantive issues relevant for the work of the Convention and the Protocol will be addressed through the respective decisions of the Meetings of the Parties, and not through the declaration.

The document was submitted to the Working Group of the Parties to the Protocol at its third meeting (Geneva, 20–21 November 2013)<sup>2</sup>, and was also made available to Parties to the Aarhus Convention and stakeholders for comments<sup>3</sup>. National focal points to the Convention and to the Protocol were kindly requested to coordinate their comments on the document and to submit to the secretariat one consolidated input per country. Thereafter, the document was revised, taking into consideration the comments received, by the two Bureaux under the leadership of the Chairs, and was made available to Parties and stakeholders for a second commenting round. It is also being submitted to the Convention's Working Group of the Parties for consideration. The document will then be revised again by the two Bureaux, in the light of the comments received, and submitted to the joint high-level segment of the next Meetings of the Parties (Maastricht, the Netherlands, 2 July 2014) for consideration.

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<sup>2</sup> The key outcomes of the meeting are available online at <http://www.unece.org/environmental-policy/treaties/public-participation/meetings-and-events/public-participation/public-participation/2013/third-meeting-of-the-working-group-of-the-parties-to-the-protocol-on-prtrs/prtr-wgp3.html>

<sup>3</sup> The comments received are available online at <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/aarhus/wgp17.html> (Statements and comments).

## Introduction

1. We, the Ministers and heads of delegation from Parties and Signatories to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and to its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (Protocol on PRTRs), together with representatives of other States, international, regional and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), parliamentarians and other representatives of civil society throughout the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region and beyond, gathered jointly at the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention and the second session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, affirm the following.

2. We are convinced that provision of effective access to environmental information to the public is highly important; it is an essential prerequisite for successful public participation and, as a consequence, also impacts on the need to seek access to justice. All of the three Aarhus pillars — access to environmental information, public participation and access to justice — are essential elements of environmental democracy. We therefore reaffirm our strong commitment to transparency and democracy which, in turn, will lead to environmental decision-making that makes a truly positive difference for the living conditions of present and future generations.

3. In the “The Future We Want”<sup>4</sup> the world recognized that good governance and a truly sustainable economy requires the effective involvement of the public, be it in their role as voters, consumers or shareholders. Broad public participation and access to information and judicial and administrative proceedings are recognized as essential to the promotion of sustainable development, which requires the meaningful involvement and active participation of regional, national and subnational legislatures and judiciaries, and other interested stakeholders. This commitment once again reaffirmed the value of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs as effective tools for furthering environmental democracy, through encouraging the active participation of all interested stakeholders in processes that contribute to decision-making, planning and implementation of policies and programmes at all levels and for furthering the implementation of a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

4. We reiterate our strong commitment to empowering people, improving the state of the environment and to furthering sustainable development through the promotion of the Convention and its Protocol and their principles within the ECE region and beyond.

## I. Information in the age of knowledge

5. We recognize close links between the effective implementation of the Convention and its Protocol and the protection of environmental activists and whistle-blowers, freedom of speech and the safe participation of citizens in decision-making affecting their lives. Governments should recognize the important role played, as well as the risks faced, by such activists and whistle-blowers, and ensure that they enjoy adequate protection. On the other hand, to reduce the need for whistle-blowers, Governments must ensure transparency as well as remove barriers and overcome challenges to accessing justice. Furthermore, nowadays Governments are often well informed about the actions of their citizens,

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<sup>4</sup> Outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio de Janeiro, 20–22 June 2012 (A/RES/66/288, annex).

including those related to the environment. We urge Governments in their turn to exercise openness and transparency in environmental matters, thus providing a solid basis for public participation.

6. Access to environmental information is a precondition for participatory and transparent governance. Especially in times of economic crisis, the efforts made to improve governance are investments in democracy; the economic crisis should not be seized as an excuse to cut down on environmental protection and procedural rights. In times of economic crisis, access to information, participation and access to justice are even more important, as the focus on solving the crisis has led to increased pressure to weaken measures aimed at protecting the environment. Openness and transparency not only create a foundation for sustainable development leading to an attractive investment climate, but also support policies to tackle inequality and poverty by ensuring that all persons are provided with information and can engage meaningfully in decision-making that affects them. Transparency with regard to environmental information is also an important instrument to support innovation, as well as to promote best available techniques and good practices towards the implementation of green economy. In addition, pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs) help to evaluate progress in the implementation of green economy.

7. We consider that, on the one hand, the Convention and its Protocol can play an important role in facilitating the development of shared environmental information systems (SEIS) across the ECE region; and, on the other hand, that implementation and ratification of the Protocol can be highly facilitated by development of national SEIS. In this regard, we will strive for further efficiency and upward harmonization of the Protocol's requirements in relation to and in coordination with other relevant reporting obligations.

8. We acknowledge and encourage increased use of new opportunities offered by modern communication tools, Internet-based and other social media, which are becoming increasingly important for the fast distribution of environmental information to and by the public with instant Internet access, thereby contributing to the promotion of transparency. Another recent trend has demonstrated that the public can play an essential role in collecting and sharing environmental data through mobile devices, which allow for information to be gathered and uploaded online, thus contributing to formal environmental monitoring systems.

## **II. Environmental democracy for all**

9. We recognize that the efficiency of international governance on environmental matters should still be significantly improved. The Aarhus Convention and its Protocol remain the only legally binding international instruments established to implement Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Promoting their principles — and notably access to information and public participation — in international forums in matters relating to the environment remains essential. This holds true not only for forums dealing directly with environmental matters as such, but also for related forums, such as the international financial institutions and trade-related organizations, where transparency in decision-making processes that impact the environment is of the utmost importance. We therefore reaffirm our commitment to promoting open information and the effective engagement of stakeholders, including environmental NGOs, in international forums.

10. The non-confrontational compliance mechanisms of the Convention and the Protocol on PRTRs contribute to the mediation of conflicts between the public and Governments and are directed towards assisting countries in implementing the requirements of the Convention and its Protocol. We will therefore strive to further increase the

effectiveness of these compliance mechanisms, and offer to share these experiences with other interested forums.

11. Due to their cross-cutting nature, the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol provide a unique opportunity for building synergies with a number of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), organizations and processes. We welcome these partnerships and recognize the important role that partner organizations play in helping to implement the two treaties. We also underline the necessity to seek further synergies with those organizations and other MEAs sharing similar objectives in order to facilitate their implementation and ratification, as appropriate.

12. The Aarhus Convention and its Protocol are open to accession by countries outside the ECE region. We call upon countries that are interested in doing so to join the Aarhus family or to use their achievements as a model. In this regard, we warmly 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, and we stand ready to support these initiatives.

13. The improvement of the quality and the completeness of data reported and the effective access to information by the public in relation to the pollutants that are released into the environment remain important tasks to be fulfilled. We call upon the Protocol's Parties to continue to pursue this goal by working towards the full implementation of the Protocol, through increasing the number of its Parties within the ECE region or applying its principles and provisions, in particular in countries with economies in transition. We recognize the importance of promoting capacity-building in these countries and the important role of the Aarhus Centres and international organizations in facilitating implementation of the Convention and its Protocol in this regard.

### **III. Achieving the future we want**

14. We note with great concern that in many countries across the world people are still denied basic information about and influence over the quality of their drinking water, the air they breathe and the land they live on. Projects with a significant impact on the environment are implemented despite the objections of the public concerned and the impact they may have on people's living conditions and health, in particular that of vulnerable groups, such as children and women, and with little or no possibility for them to appeal such decisions through the courts.

15. At the same time, one can see active citizenship flourishing. Citizens want to be taken seriously and they want to mould their own future. They increasingly play a role in collecting environmental information and distributing it through modern media. The Aarhus Convention and its Protocol are therefore becoming increasingly relevant for people's daily lives. These are truly people's instruments. Coalitions of the private sector, NGOs and citizens, but also institutes of science and learning and Governments, engage frequently in initiatives that set ambitious goals to contribute to greening the economy or that promote a sustainable future. This trend requires that Governments as well as private actors ensure transparency in their policies related to environmental information, so that everyone can make informed choices about their future. We encourage companies to integrate sustainability information in their reporting cycle. We also encourage the improvement of models for the integration of sustainability reporting based on existing frameworks.

16. "The Future We Want" made a number of appeals to improve transparency, access and participation. It is our obligation to implement these words in our daily actions.

17. We recognize that products can significantly impact the environment throughout their lifecycle and when they have reached the end of their lifetimes. We therefore consider that promoting greater transparency in relation to information about products and product-related decision-making is a topic of great importance which should be further considered under the Convention and Protocol.

18. Moving to more sustainable lifestyles as envisaged in “The Future We Want” implies substantially reducing our consumption of resources, inter alia, through improving the resource efficiency of products and processes. Here, too, transparency plays a crucial role by ensuring easy availability of objective information about the resource footprint of products and processes, including data on inputs such as energy, water and other resources.

19. In addition, greater transparency concerning the pollutants stored onsite in facilities or the onsite transfers of waste would help the public to be better aware of the scale of the risk from accidental releases.

20. While increasing the number of ratifications and ensuring full implementation by the Parties are still priorities for the Protocol, we recognize that, on the basis of experience gained, possible future developments with regard to the issues described in the preceding paragraph, should be considered in order to keep the Protocol’s principles and provisions under continuous review and to ensure that it continues to serve as an adequate instrument to achieve its objectives.

21. Transparent national and multilateral processes that would benefit from the inputs of both Governments and stakeholders, including NGOs, academic institutions, parliaments, local authorities and the private sector, will be critical for setting a people-centred post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals, as well as for evaluating the progress made in their implementation. We are convinced that the Convention and its Protocol provide an essential minimum framework for Governments to effectively engage a wide range of stakeholders in decision-making, thereby providing the key to effective environmental governance.

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