

AARHUS CENTRES osce.org/eea FOCUS SOUTH CAUCASUS

Dear reader,

You are holding in your hands the first edition of AARHUS CENTRES FOCUS – a new publication by the OSCE uniquely dedicated to Aarhus Centres in the South Caucasus.

Over the years, we have learned that environmental issues need to be addressed from a broad perspective since they do not halt at national borders. They require us to work together, to share information and experiences, and to think out of the box and find new solutions for long-standing problems. What could thus be more natural than to introduce another tool to inform each other of our innovations, ideas and initiatives?

Information-sharing and awareness-raising have become something of a mantra for institutions and organizations that deal with common environmental challenges. The Aarhus Centres – mandated to work with practically everyone who has a stake in environmental protection, be their governments, civil society, academic institutions, the media, or the private sector – have shown how efficient such information-sharing really can be. Their work is what makes citizens become more involved – more involved in shaping their environment, their country's laws, and their society.

This has also been confirmed by an independent evaluation of the Centres done in 2008. It found that most countries, in which the OSCE had supported the establishment and activities of Aarhus Centres, had reported progress in creating a general legislative framework for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention, acknowledged the Centres' essential role in awareness-raising, and recognized the impact of their work.

We appreciate this assessment, and we appreciate the support we have received from the governments for the Aarhus Centres and their activities. We hope this newsletter will develop into an active tool for the Aarhus Centre stakeholders and others interested in the Aarhus Centre initiative, helping all of us to learn from experiences made, lessons learned, and best practices shared.

On the Aarhus Convention unece.org/env/pp

The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted on 25 June 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus. Among other issues, the Convention, which entered into force on 30 October 2001, links environmental rights and human rights, and establishes that sustainable development

can only be achieved through the involvement of all stakeholders. It also links government accountability and environmental protection, and focuses on interactions between the public and public authorities in a democratic context.

The Convention is not only an environmental agreement; it is also a Convention about government

accountability, transparency and responsiveness. It grants the public rights and imposes on Parties and public authorities obligations regarding access to information, public participation and access to justice.

On the Aarhus Centres osce.org/eea/13471.html

Since 2002, the OSCE has supported the creation of Aarhus Centres and Public Environmental Information Centres, both through its field offices and its Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities. It has done so in close co-operation with the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat and, in most cases, with the support of the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative. Over time, the Centres have become successful models through which government officials and non-governmental organization (NGO) members can meet to discuss and resolve issues that relate to the environment and environmental security.

In the South Caucasus, all three countries have opened Aarhus Centres: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Working both in capital cities and in regions, these Centres have been very active to promote the implementation of the Aarhus Convention on national and local levels, to help governments fulfil their respective obligations under the Convention, and to involve the citizens of the region in environmental decision-making.

In 2009, the OSCE supported the development of a set of guidelines for the Aarhus Centres, with the purpose of enhancing and streamlining their work, and to give

them guidance for their strategic orientation, set-up and activities, thereby ensuring a common understanding of all stakeholders on the roles of the Centres.

Many of those involved in driving the Aarhus Centre initiative, meet at regular intervals to exchange experiences and lessons learned. The next such meeting will take place in Istanbul from 27 to 29 January 2010.

On the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative envsec.org

A partnership established in 2003 between the OSCE, UNEP, UNDP, UNECE, REC, and NATO as an associate partner. It aims at supporting countries in their efforts to manage environmental risks and facilitates dialogue and co-operation on critical environmental issues as a way to promote peace and security in four regions: South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The Governments of Belgium, Canada, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United States of America are among the major donors for Aarhus Centres within the framework of the ENVSEC Initiative.



Armenia

Aarhus Centres in Yerevan (opened May 2002), Gavar, Gyumri, Goris, Dilijan, Idjevan, Kapan, Hrazdan, Vanadzor (between 2002 and 2008), Yeghegnadzor, Yeghvard, Aparan, Stepanavan and Alaverdi (2008) aarhus.am

Armenia is not only host to the first Aarhus Centre in South Caucasus (in Yerevan), but maintains also the widest network of regional Centres in the area. From public lectures to the holding of a model OSCE conference, or the formation of an environmental youth group – the Armenian Aarhus Centres have shown very active engagement with civil society, academy and government officials. In the main, their mandate is to:

- serve as resource centres for environmental information;
- promote public participation in local environmental decision-making and in the development and revision of environmental legislation;
- provide a link between local and central governmental agencies on environmental issues; and
- facilitate the development of local environmental strategies and action plans.

In addition, an Environmental Law Resource Centre was established in 2008 at the Yerevan State University (YSU), whose work has paved the way for a participatory review of draft legislation that may have environmental consequences for the country.

“The Aarhus Centres proved to be instrumental in promoting ‘green democracy’.”

**Ambassador Sergey Kapinos,
Head of the OSCE Office in Yerevan**

Zooming in on...

➤ ...the **Environmental Law Resource Centre in Yerevan**, which held a number of lectures, round table meetings, public hearings and training sessions throughout the year. Most notably, these included European Environmental Law, risk analysis, environmental impact assessments (EIA), hazardous substances and waste management, and the links between private sector activities and environmental protection in Armenia.

Also several public hearings on draft legislation took place at the Centre, such as on a new bill dealing with “Freedom to Receive Data”, intended to replace a 2003 Freedom of Information Law. The bill was vividly discussed by government representatives, members of international organizations and NGOs, students and scientific university staff, and resulted in the conclusion by the participants that the existing Freedom of Information Law was in compliance with democratic principles and its improvement was more reasonable



than adopting a new one. The Centre’s legal specialists gathered all remarks and suggestions made at the hearing and submitted them to the Ministry of Justice and the Armenian Ombudsman.

In the legal realm, the Environmental Law Resource Centre has over time built up a strong relationship with the YSU and its students. It organized courses at the University’s Law Department on environmental law in the European Union, and students conducted research on a variety of environmental legal topics. They also held a conference on environmental security, attended by professors and students from YSU and other Armenian universities. Topics discussed at the event included the management and monitoring of natural resources,

protection of water resources, genetically modified organisms, and environmental security issues in the context of nuclear energy. As a previously unexpected side-effect, the conference resulted in a decision by students to form a group of “Young Environmentalists”, mandating themselves with awareness-raising activities on nature protection, the organization of environmental actions, and increasing the interest among the student community for environmental matters.

Moreover, a course on European Environmental Law for master students was developed and incorporated into the curricula of the Law Faculty. A manual on environmental rights was also developed, as was a thorough analysis on the practices of environmental law enforcement in Armenia, together with the Ombudsman’s office.



In September, the Resource Centre organized a public hearing that dealt with a concept drafted by the Ministry of Nature Protection proposing an integrated national system of environmental education and awareness. Ministry representatives were present at the hearing, as were officials from the Education and Science Ministry, national education institutions and the YSU, among others. This time, the participants acknowledged the positive effects the concept might have on co-operation and co-ordination between the two ministries, and it was decided to assist with further improving the draft. Explicitly mentioned were the best practices of the



Environmental Law Resource Centre and Aarhus Centres in providing new information and knowledge to an audience of all ages.

The Aarhus Centres in Armenia have made considerable efforts to co-ordinate their activities in the country and to expand their network of partners. In June, representatives of the 14 Centres met in Yerevan to discuss common problems and challenges, an event which helped the participants understand concepts such as different types of legal liability, access to information legislation, and the compliance mechanisms applied for the access to justice in environmental matters.

The Armenian Centres have also facilitated discussions on environmental governance. At a two-day seminar in November, officials and representatives of NGOs gathered in Tsakhkadzor, 50 kms north of Yerevan, to discuss issues such as transparent and accountable management and international governance tools. The event was organized by the Fridtjof Nansen Institute of Norway with the support of the OSCE Office in Yerevan, and in co-operation with the Ministries of Nature Protection and Territorial Administration of Armenia.

“The event contributed to more active co-operation between the Aarhus Centres and local self-governmental bodies in the country.”

Ashot Giloyan, Head of the Self-Government Department at Armenia’s Ministry of Territorial Administration

Georgia

Aarhus Centre Georgia (September 2005) aarhus.ge

The Aarhus Centre Georgia was established in 2005 as a joint initiative of the OSCE Mission to Georgia and Georgia's Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources. The Centre, which initially operated as a local NGO, continued its activities from 2006 to 2009 as a project of the OSCE Mission's Economic and Environmental Dimension. Since June 2009, the Centre is functioning in the framework of an ENVSEC project, administered by the OSCE.

The goal of the Centre is to facilitate implementation of the Aarhus Convention at the national level through a variety of activities. In particular, it facilitates public access to information on environmental issues, conducts training sessions and awareness-raising campaigns, monitors the public participation process in environmental decision-making, and provides recommendations to the Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources on how to improve the effectiveness of the process. It also prepares and disseminates guidelines that explain rights and obligations under the Aarhus Convention and serves as mediator between governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Zooming in on...

➤ ...the **Aarhus Centre Georgia's** co-operative work with governmental and non-governmental sectors. Based on its approach to take into account the needs and interests of all stakeholders, the Centre provides objective analysis and recommendations. A successful example of this work is the round table meeting held by the Centre in September on the civil society perspective on environmental and social challenges and the effects these have on sustainable development in Georgia. Offering free space and equipment for meetings, roundtables, seminars and other environment-related events, the Centre facilitates policy dialogue among all parties involved, which is a crucial element of democratic development.



“Our long-term vision is to secure the enjoyment of the rights of access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters throughout the pan-European region and beyond in order to improve the state of the environment and contribute to the protection of the right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being”.

UNECE Aarhus Convention Strategic Plan 2009-2014, adopted at the third meeting of the Parties held from 11 to 13 June 2008 in Riga

To achieve the best results with respect to access to information, the Centre developed a new, user-friendly website which contains a variety of information from governmental and civil society sources, including national legislation, international treaties, reports, analysis, pollution monitoring data, guidelines on how to obtain environmental information, and how to apply to court. Other information, such as databases of environmental NGOs, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Reports, court cases on environmental matters,



as well as information on environmental consulting companies, are also posted on the site.

Recently, the Centre started preparing an environmental “metabase” that includes contact details of organizations holding specific environmental information. An important achievement was an agreement with the Parliament of Georgia on posting draft laws related to environmental issues on the Centre’s website. The availability of draft laws prior to their adoption provides an opportunity to citizens and other stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process on environmental laws and therefore supports the implementation of the Aarhus Convention’s Article 8.

“Each Party shall strive to promote effective public participation at an appropriate stage, and while options are still open, during the preparation by public authorities of executive regulations and other generally applicable legally binding rules that may have a significant effect on the environment.”

Aarhus Convention, Article 8

Representatives of the Centre regularly monitored public hearings of EIA reports such as on the construction of an electrical transmission line, the construction of a railway bridge, and the operation of a solid waste landfill in Tbilisi municipality. Furthermore, to assist its stakeholders to better understand national procedures for obtaining permits or licenses for EIA or for utilization

of natural resources, the Centre developed a set of guidelines, which are available on its website.

Aiming to improve the understanding in Georgia of the Aarhus Convention and related environmental challenges, the Centre launched in spring 2009 a new course on International Environmental Law at Tbilisi State University for law students. The Centre also conducted training sessions for judges, launched radio campaigns, and held seminars in major cities of Georgia for an audience of students and civil society members.

To more effectively distribute information on the environment, the Centre published a number of articles in a monthly newspaper issued by the Ministry of Education and Science. The articles addressed issues such as the importance of waste separation, biodiversity conservation, energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources. Recently, the Centre started a campaign to promote waste separation and recycling with a school in Tbilisi.

The Centre also continued to make its services available for free to the general public and other stakeholders, including access to the Internet and Georgia’s legal code, the Centre’s environmental library, as well as free legal consultations.



Azerbaijan

Aarhus Centres in Baku (September 2003), Ganja and Gazakh (both 2007)

The Aarhus Centres in Azerbaijan are primarily working on the first pillar of the Aarhus Convention by providing access to environmental information and holding public awareness-raising activities.

Zooming in on...

➤ ... the **Centre in Gazakh**, in north-western Azerbaijan, which has been particularly busy throughout the year with a variety of public meetings and discussions, in line with its mandate to raise awareness and distribute environmental information. This included several meetings addressing biodiversity protection and the forest fire prevention held together with the Information Unit of the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, as well as a briefing for employees of the Tovuz District Gas Operations Department on the environmental impact of industrial and household wastes. The Centre also organized meetings in secondary schools in the region to talk with the students and teachers about the Aarhus Convention and promote the competition “Nice city, clean village” among them.

“Public access to information, as well as being a right in itself, is essential for meaningful public participation and access to justice. When properly implemented, the right to information leads on the one hand to more transparent, accountable government and on the other to a more informed, environmentally aware public.”

Riga Declaration, June 2008

In April, the first issue of an environmental newsletter was published by the Centres in Azerbaijan, covering oil pollution in the Caspian Sea, drinking water problems, and ecological problems faced by Azerbaijan’s National Parks. A second issue, published in August, covered issues such as the prevention of forest fires, the results of a transboundary environmental monitoring



on the Kura-Aras rivers, and an interview with the local environmental agency, “Saniya”, on the threat of extinction of sturgeons in the Caspian Sea.

➤ A workshop held by the **Baku Centre** in November brought together staff of the regional ecology and natural resources departments of the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, who were trained on the Aarhus Centre Guidelines and effective techniques and best practices of public participation in environmental decision-making. The event produced a number of constructive suggestions, among them to hold competitions for the wider population to stimulate interest and awareness of the Aarhus Convention, to gather and print new information material for judges about the Convention and related legislation, and to work with the Ministry of Education towards introducing a new course on environmental subjects in school curricula.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe works for **stability, prosperity** and **democracy** in 56 States through political dialogue about shared values and through practical work that makes a lasting difference.

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**For further information on Aarhus
Centres and the Aarhus Convention:**

osce.org/eea/13471.html

unece.org/env/pp

This is not a consensus document.

The OSCE/OCEEA thanks all those who contributed photos of Aarhus Centre activities for this publication.