

# AARHUS CENTRES [osce.org/eea](http://osce.org/eea) FOCUS CENTRAL ASIA

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 Central Asia.

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](http://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](http://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 Central Asia, three countries have opened Aarhus Centres: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and, most recently, Kazakhstan. Working both in capital cities and remote regional areas, these Centres have been very active to promote the implementation of the Aarhus Convention on regional, 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](http://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.



# Tajikistan

**Aarhus Centres in Dushanbe (opened September 2003), Khujand (April 2005) and Kurgan-Tyube (April 2009) [aarhus.tj](http://aarhus.tj)**

The establishment of the Aarhus Centres in Tajikistan is closely interlinked with the ENVSEC activities in the country. Both the first Centre in Dushanbe and the second one in Khujand were opened with the support of ENVSEC, in Khujand's case with the support of a local NGO, the "Youth Group on Protection of the Environment". With the opening in April 2009 of a third Centre in the city of Kurgan-Tyube in the south-western province of Khatlon, the drive towards implementation of the Aarhus Convention in Tajikistan has gained further momentum. In November, the OSCE Office in Tajikistan held a discussion forum to improve the dialogue among the three Centres, help them share experiences and better coordinate their activities.

## Zooming in on...

➤ **...Khujand**, where new initiatives have considerably strengthened the Aarhus Centre's outreach to the wider public of the region. Mandated to improve cross-border co-operation in the Ferghana Valley and to raise awareness of linkages between environmental and security issues, the Centre produced a video spot and a TV show ("COMPASS") that not only targeted some 15,000 citizens living in Sughd Province, but also brought about the very tangible result of doubling the number of visitors to the Centre from 2008 to 2009. The central goal of the video spot, entitled "Your environmental rights", was to inform the viewers on the main principles of how the public can become involved in the decision-making process on environmental issues and how they can obtain information on it.

"EcoNews", an ecological newsletter targeting civil society, government officials dealing with environmental issues, universities and the private sector, is another initiative through which the Centre in Khujand distributed relevant information on environmental security. The two issues produced in 2009 contained, among others, articles that dealt with air pollution, land degradation and biodiversity.

In November, the Centre organized an awareness-raising campaign on radioactive waste safety in the cities of Taboshar and Digmai, in northern Tajikistan.



The event, which garnered a lot of interest among the local population who asked how they could become involved in solving the problem of radioactive waste themselves, included a movie screening at a school, public information meetings and the production of a film on radioactive safety. Local TV was actively involved in this campaign, along with the OSCE and IAEA experts working in the region at the time. An immediate result of the campaign was that a number of citizens of the region called for further public information campaigns and requested to include radioactive waste safety issues in students' curricula. In addition, teachers, medical staff and construction workers were trained on the practical aspects of the radioactive safety.

Further promoting public participation in environmental decision-making, the Centre in Khujand also held several training sessions and seminars on issues such as the methods of public ecological monitoring and environmental impact assessments and the right to access to information and justice, involving students, local officials from Environmental Protection Departments, private sector companies, legal staff and journalists. The Centre also provided a number of legal consultations on environmental rights through the NGO, “Human Rights Centre”, mainly related to problems of chemical waste in households, illegal cutting of trees and industrial air pollution.

- In **Dushanbe**, the International Conference on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTR) was held in May, which was widely considered an important step forward in implementing the Aarhus Convention in Central Asia. The PRTR Protocol of the Convention regulates information on pollution, thereby exerting a significant downward pressure on pollution levels. The conference was organized by the European Commission, with support by the OSCE, UNECE and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, to encourage Central Asian countries to sign the PRTR Protocol.



In September, Tajikistan’s capital was also the host to the 7th Central Asia Journalism Festival, which aims to increase awareness about the environment and sustainable use of natural resources. More than 70 journalists from Tajikistan and neighbouring Central Asian countries, representatives of civil society, international organizations, and Tajikistan’s Committee on Environmental Protection attended the Festival.

*“Media plays a crucial role in implementing the Aarhus Convention, and it also may contribute to sustainable development and conservation of the environment.”*

**Frank Johansen, Political Officer with the OSCE Office in Tajikistan**

The event was sponsored by the OSCE and supported by the Committee on Environmental Protection.

- Although in existence for barely nine months, the Aarhus Centre in **Kurgan-Tyube** has already become a popular location for citizens searching for information and advice on environmental problems, such as those generated by garbage dumps in 14 micro-districts of Kurgan-Tyube city, a chemical waste dump site, and ammoniac-polluted water disposed of by fertilizer plants in Vakhsh district. No mechanism to follow up on these cases exists so far, but the Centre began negotiations with the Regional Committee for Environmental Protection to establish such a mechanism.

In November, the Centre also held a seminar with representatives of NGOs, small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as local youth, to discuss and raise awareness on environmental problems including those related to transboundary pollution emanating from chemical processes, industry or individual households.

*“The Centre will contribute to exchange of experience between civil society and authorities on environmental governance problems and will have a positive effect on awareness-raising of Tajikistan’s commitments within the framework of the Aarhus Convention.”*

**Abdurakhmon Kodiri,  
First Deputy of the Governor of Khatlon**



# Kyrgyzstan

## Aarhus Centre in Osh (December 2004)

The Aarhus Centre in Kyrgyzstan, located in Osh in the southern part of the country, was established as part of an ENVSEC project supported by the OSCE. Operating now as an NGO, the Centre works on:

- awareness-raising on the Aarhus Convention;
- improving the youth's environmental awareness and involvement in environmental protection;
- promoting environmental journalism; and
- fostering dialogue between Government and civil society on environmental issues.

## Zooming in on...

➤ ... the Aarhus Centre in **Osh**, which organized several public hearings, a "March for the Environment" and a number of key meetings and training seminars throughout 2009. These were testimony to how central the engagement of the Centre has become for environmental action in the Provinces of Osh, Jalalabat and Batken.

A good example is the co-operation among government officials and residents of the village of Birlik, Batken Province, when confronted with a very concrete problem: the effects on the land by activities of a mining company in the area. Following a first meeting in March, at which the participants discussed the issue and decided to involve relevant government agencies and local



authorities, a public hearing was organized by the Aarhus Centre in April to give representatives of the mining company an opportunity to publicly present their plans to the local residents. The hearing was also attended by officials of Kyrgyzstan's Geology and Mineral Resources Agency, which subsequently decided to refuse the company an operating licence, based on the results of the hearing. Moreover, the decision was taken that the company was responsible for restoring the land affected by its activities in the meantime.

A similar development took place in Alga, Kadamjai district, where the issue at stake was the activity of a local oil and gas corporation in the region. In this case, the



public hearing resulted in a resolution that, among others, required the company to present quarterly information about its activities to the media and the people living in the district, as well as to oblige the Osh-Batken Inter-regional Environmental Protection Department to provide environmental information in the region with regard to activities of private sector companies.

*“Each Party shall promote environmental education and environmental awareness among the public, especially on how to obtain access to information, to participate in decision-making and to obtain access to justice in environmental matters.”*

**Aarhus Convention, Article 3, Paragraph 3**

April also saw visible environmental action when more than 400 people participated in the “2009 March for Parks”, which was organized by the Aarhus Centre and the Centre for American Studies of Osh State University to celebrate Earth Day. The marchers gathered at Osh’s Novoi Park, were handed out gloves and plastic bags and immediately got to work: they cleaned up the park up to the shores of the Ak-Buura river; all in all, up to five miles distance were covered. As compensation for their “dirty work”, entertainment awaited the campaigners, including dance shows, music performed on the Komuz (a Kyrgyz string instrument), games for the participating children and award handouts for photo and essay competitions.

Finally, the Centre also organized a number of meetings, round table discussions and training sessions, including in November an event that targeted law students of several Osh-based universities. The participants were introduced to the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention and national legislation dealing with the environmental protection.



# Kazakhstan

## Aarhus Centre in Atyrau (September 2009)

Kazakhstan's first Aarhus Centre is located in Atyrau Province in the western part of the country. Established by the Ministry of Environment Protection, Atyrau's regional administration (Akimat), the OSCE and the Ecoforum of NGOs of Kazakhstan, the Centre aims at addressing the environmental and security challenges in the Zhaik-Caspian Basin region. Hosted by the Akimat, the Centre will particularly be instrumental in addressing environmental challenges of the Caspian Sea in the context of the 2003 Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea, as well as the ENVSEC Assessment for the Eastern Caspian Region.

## Zooming in on...

➤ ... the Centre in **Atyrau**, which has only been in operation for a few months and has already witnessed an impressive set of activities in the field of environmental security.

In October, the OSCE and Kazakhstan's Ministry of Emergency Situations organized a three-day workshop to discuss possible responses to remedy and clean up oil spills, which is of particular concern considering the importance of the oil industry for some Caspian littoral countries. Emergency preparedness for an effective response to oil spills and regional co-operation supporting the development and strengthening of national response systems were at the core of the discussions.

*"This workshop is an example of how the OSCE can go from general political discussions, to practical implementation of projects that will help align the response of Caspian littoral countries to oil spills."*

**Marc Baltes, Senior Adviser at the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities**

To give the staff of the new Centre an opportunity to study the experience of other Aarhus Centres, the OSCE Centre in Astana organized in November a visit to the Centres in Georgia and Armenia. The three



staff members were given a thorough insight into the functioning of the Advisory Board of the Georgia Aarhus Centre, and learned about how to actively promote access to information, including via the web-site and how to facilitate and monitor environmental impact assessment processes. The Aarhus Centres in Armenia introduced their colleagues from Astana their partnerships with the local administrations and their efforts for improving environmental legislation.



- 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](http://osce.org/eea/13471.html)

[unece.org/env/pp](http://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.