

Regional Roundtable

„Strengthening public participation in transboundary water management -
exploring the synergies of Espoo, Helsinki and Aarhus Conventions“

Tirana, Albania, 25-26 March 2015

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

The South-Eastern Europe Regional Roundtable of Aarhus Centres was organized on 25-26 March 2015 in Tirana, Albania, to provide the framework for stronger activities of the Aarhus Centres in the region in promoting public awareness and participatory decision-making on environment and security issues related to transboundary water management, and to strengthen their regional network.

The Roundtable gathered around 40 representatives of Aarhus Centres, local authorities and relevant government agencies from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia as well as of international and regional actors. Presentations by experts increased the knowledge of the participation mechanisms under the *Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context* (Espoo Convention) and the *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes* (Helsinki Convention). This was accompanied by practical examples of public participation in transboundary water management from within and outside the region. The presentations and discussions confirmed the synergies between the Espoo, Helsinki and Aarhus Conventions and the potential of the Aarhus Centres to strengthen the involvement of civil society to foster the implementation of these international conventions in South-Eastern Europe, contributing to overall democratic and sustainable development in the region.

The Aarhus Centres representatives expressed the need, interest and commitment to co-operate at national and regional levels in addressing common environmental challenges with particular focus on the management of water. During group discussions, the participants identified common challenges for public participation in transboundary water management in the region and developed recommendations for Aarhus Centres to improve public participation in transboundary water management and environmental impact assessments in transboundary contexts. These discussions resulted in the identification of priority issues, challenges and opportunities.

Main issues at stake in transboundary water management in the region:

- Lack of knowledge and information exchange at transboundary level;
- Insufficient communication between authorities and the public, and authorities and media, including a lack of media capacities for reporting on environmental issues.

Main challenges of public participation in transboundary water management and in participation in transboundary environmental impact assessments (EIA):

- Lack of transparency in the work of authorities;
- Low public interest;
- Poor communication with authorities at all levels.

Most promising approaches for public participation:

- Building a network of Aarhus Centres in neighbouring countries/ regional network of Aarhus Centres;
- Application of Information Technologies for better dissemination of information to public;
- More active role of organized local stakeholders/citizens and representation in transboundary water management processes.

The participants discussed and prioritized measures how the Aarhus Centres could foster public participation in transboundary water management and engagement of public in the transboundary EIA processes. The following five priority measures have been identified.

Recommendations for Aarhus Centres' activities related to public participation in transboundary water management and in Environmental Impact Assessment in transboundary contexts:

Short-term activities

- Memorandum of Understanding between the Aarhus Centres of the South Eastern Europe region to establish a regional network with the purpose to facilitate systematic exchange of information and conduct joint activities at transboundary level;
- Organize the exchange of good practices with EU member countries;

Mid/long-term activities

- Awareness raising campaigns on existing river basin agreements, transboundary EIA process and public participation rights;
- Memorandum of Understanding between the respective authorities in charge of environmental issues and the Aarhus Centres on information exchange about transboundary water projects;
- Capacity development of Aarhus Centres in the areas of transboundary water management, Espoo, Helsinki and Basel Conventions; including the creation a regional online communication platform between the Aarhus Centres and the establishment of a mechanism of communication between Aarhus Centres and authorities.