



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Aarhus Centres Meeting

22-23. January 2009, Vienna, Austria
Hofburg Congress Centre, Segment Galerie I

ANNOTATED PROVISIONAL AGENDA

A. Registration

Registration of participants will begin at 09:30 hours on 22 January 2009 at Hofburg Congress Centre.

B. Welcome and Introduction

Under this agenda item, statements will be made by representatives of the Greece/OSCE Chairmanship, Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the European Commission (tbc).

C. Session 1: Implementing the Aarhus Convention

(a) Independent Evaluation of Aarhus Centres

The OCEEA commissioned an independent evaluation of Aarhus Centres which was concluded in September 2008. The evaluation was a combination of desk reviews and document analysis and consultations with key stakeholders (including the Aarhus Convention Secretariat, OSCE Secretariat staff, OSCE field operations staff, national focal points for the Convention, managers of the Aarhus Centres, government representatives, NGOs, academia, etc). Under this agenda item, the Consultant for the evaluation will present his findings and recommendations, as contained in his report.

(b) Aarhus Centres' Accomplishments at a Glance

The representatives of Aarhus Centres from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are expected to present briefly:

- history and structure of the Aarhus Centres;
- primary areas of focus;
- major achievements and challenges; and
- future prospects and needs.

Kazakhstan will present the preparatory process for establishment of an Aarhus Centre, including their objectives and expectations.

Presentations are expected to yield a discussion for identifying major strengths and weaknesses of the Aarhus Centres.

D. Session 2: Aarhus Centres and the Three Pillars

Experts will present three pillars of the Convention and feed the discussion on how the Aarhus Centres could better contribute to the implementation of the Convention. Presentations and discussions will take into account the major outcomes of the Third Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention (including the Riga Declaration and the Strategic Plan for 2009-2014). Discussions are expected to focus on the human, technical and financial capacities needed by the Aarhus Centres to deliver these tasks and the role of other different stakeholders (including government agencies, local administrations, NGOs and international organizations).

(a) Access to Information:

Access to information stands as the first of the pillars. It is the first in time, since effective public participation in decision-making depends on full, accurate, up-to-date information. It can also stand alone, in the sense that public may seek access to information for any number of purposes, not just to participate. The access to information pillar is split in two. The first part concerns the right of the public to seek information from public authorities and the obligation of public authorities to provide information in response to a request (Article 4). The second part of the information pillar concerns the right of the public to receive information and the obligation of authorities to collect and disseminate information of public interest without the need for a specific request (Article 5)*.

Under this item, discussions are expected to address issues such as the following:

- use of electronic information tools to provide public access to environmental information;
- information flow to and from national nodes of the Aarhus Clearinghouse Mechanism;
- legislative issues (including gaps and discrepancies) in relation to regulating access to information, including collection and dissemination of environmental data; and
- availability of environmental information databases.

In all these areas, the actual and potential roles of Aarhus Centres will be the main focus of discussion.

(b) Public-Participation in Decision-Making

The second pillar of the Convention is the public participation pillar. It relies upon the other two pillars for its effectiveness – the information pillar to ensure that the public can participate in an informed fashion, and the access to justice pillar to ensure that participation happens in reality. The public participation pillar is divided into three parts. The first part concerns participation by the public that may be affected by or is otherwise interested in decision-making on a specific activity, and is covered by article 6. The second part concerns the participation of the public in the development of plans, programmes and policies relating to the environment, and is covered by article 7. Finally, article 8 covers participation of the public in the preparation of laws, rules and legally binding norms.*

* Aarhus Convention Implementation Guide, UNECE, 2000

Under this item, discussions are expected to focus on issues such as the following:

- Challenges in practical application of regulatory frameworks for public participation (public awareness, definition of public, timing of notification/participation, clarity in roles and responsibilities, etc);
- Use of electronic tools to facilitate public participation procedures;
- Public participation techniques and procedures
- Linkages with the EIA and SEA initiatives and their follow-up

In all these areas, the actual and potential roles of Aarhus Centres will be the main focus of discussion.

(c) Access to Justice

The third pillar of the Aarhus Convention is the access to justice pillar. It enforces both the information and the participation pillars in domestic legal systems, and strengthens enforcement of domestic environmental law. It is covered by article 9. Specific provisions in article 9 enforce the provisions of the Convention that convey rights onto members of the public (Articles 4 and 6). The justice pillar also provides a mechanism for the public to enforce environmental law directly. *

Under this item, participants are expected to hear and discuss a presentation on both the access to justice pillar as well as the Convention's compliance mechanism. The discussions are expected to deal with the following issues:

- Public awareness and knowledge on environmental rights as introduced by the Aarhus Convention.
- Awareness of legal professionals on environmental issues, multilateral environmental agreements and the Aarhus Convention, specifically.
- Lengthy and costly legal procedures.

E. Session 3: Communications and Outreach

During their third meeting in Riga, the Parties to the Convention decided that a communication strategy should be drawn up and agreement was reached to set up an expert group to support this task. The future communication strategy is expected to (i) find ways of presenting the Convention's legal rights and opportunities in everyday language which can be understood by national and local government officials responsible for implementing the provisions of the Convention on the ground, as well as by the broader public; (ii) Identify key messages and target audiences in order to raise awareness about the Convention and build support for its implementation; (iii) Provide a framework for adopting the most effective means of communication, tailored to specific target audiences, through appropriate media channels. †

The Independent Evaluation of Aarhus Centres, on the other hand, called for a communication strategy for Aarhus Centres and for increased networking and information exchange among the Centres, at the national as well as regional levels.

* Aarhus Convention Implementation Guide, UNECE, 2000

† EECN Newflash, No.62, July 2008

Under this item, discussions are expected to focus on the following issues:

- Role of Aarhus Centres in the development and implementation of a Communication Strategy for Aarhus Convention
- Communication channels and mechanisms used by the Aarhus Centres to seek, receive, use and share information (official structures, formal consultation processes, traditional structures, media, etc).
- The need to develop a general Communications Strategy for Aarhus Centers, to be appropriately revised and adopted by each Center, as appropriate.
- The need and the mechanisms for networking among Aarhus Centers at the national and regional levels (electronic networking, newsletters, site visits and information exchange programs between Aarhus Centres, etc).
- The need for reporting specifically on communication and outreach activities as an integral component of all reporting by Aarhus Centers.
- Possible entry points to ensure effective participation of women and youth in Aarhus Centre activities.

F. Session 4: Sustainability of Aarhus Centres

Sustainability is one of the key issues for the Aarhus Centres, as also elaborated in detail through the Independent Evaluation of Aarhus Centres.

Under this item, participants are expected to discuss and make recommendations on the following issues:

- Political will and Government's ownership
- Role of Aarhus Convention National Focal Points
- Role of Aarhus Centres Management/Advisory Boards
- Public/community ownership and interest
- Capacity building
- Partnerships and coordination
 - with and among NGOs
 - local administrations
 - private sector
 - academia
 - media
- Mainstreaming of Aarhus Centres with other ongoing national and regional projects and programmes
- Resource mobilization
- Monitoring and Evaluation

G. Session 5: A Road Map for Aarhus Centres

In light of the discussions held through Sessions (1) to (4), participants are expected to discuss and agree on a Road Map for Aarhus Centres which is suggested to have two major components:

Thematic component: Entry points and activities by the Aarhus Centres to support relevant components of the Aarhus Convention Strategic Plan.

Operational component: Actions to strengthen the performance and efficiency of the Aarhus Centres.

H. Wrap-up and Closure