

AARHUS CENTRES Platforms for



Co-operation

Participation

Partnership

The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters – the Aarhus Convention was adopted in Aarhus, Denmark on 25 June 1998, and is administered by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

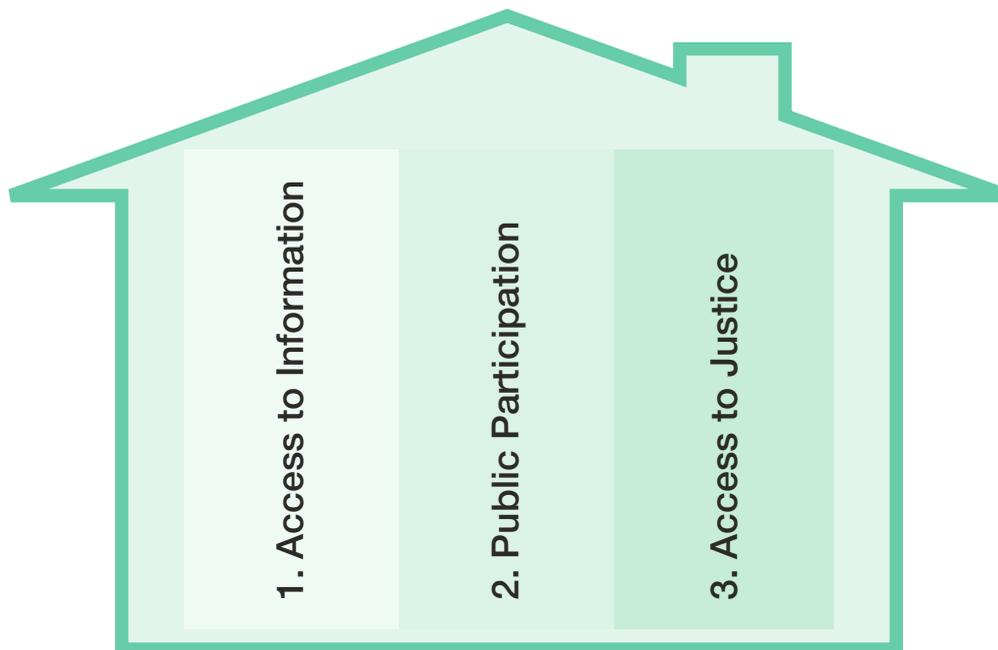
As part of its comprehensive approach to security, the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) is concerned with economic and environmental matters, recognizing that co-operation in these areas can contribute to peace, prosperity and stability.

By setting principles for “access to information”, “public participation in decision-making” and “access to justice”, the Aarhus Convention provides the OSCE with a unique tool to support environmental governance processes at the national level which in turn contributes to the countries’ efforts in addressing environment and security challenges.

Since 2002, the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) and the OSCE field presences have been supporting the establishment and functioning of Aarhus Centres and Public Environmental Information Centres (PEICs) in the countries of South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Albania <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tirana▪ Shkodra▪ Vlora	Armenia <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Yerevan▪ Dilijan▪ Gavar▪ Goris▪ Gyumri▪ Hradzan▪ Idjevan▪ Kapan▪ Vanadzor	Belarus <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Minsk	Kyrgyzstan <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Osh
Azerbaijan <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Baku▪ Ganja▪ Gazakh		Georgia <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tbilisi▪ Gardabani▪ Marneuli	Tajikistan <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Dushanbe▪ Khujand

In this initiative, the OSCE partners primarily with the Governments of the participating States where these Centres are located as well as with the leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In close co-operation with Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative – a partnership between the OSCE, UNEP, UNDP, UNECE, REC, as well as NATO as an associate partner, the Aarhus Centres and PEICs were established in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.



Aarhus Centres and PEICs **serve as a link** between the Government and NGOs in the sphere of environmental policy-making and implementation. They also provide the platforms for coalition building and partnerships among NGOs in addressing environmental issues.

The **institutional set-up and management arrangements** of Aarhus Centres and PEICs vary from country to country and even within a country. Most of them are hosted by the Ministries of Environment while some others rely on logistical support from NGOs.

The Centres are **managed by boards** consisting of an equal number of representatives from government and civil society. These boards serve as the primary source of expertise and guidance for the Aarhus Centre activities and offer a unique platform for exchange of information between governments and representatives of civil society.

Aarhus Centres and PEICs in many countries have enabled the development of a new model and understanding, whereby public institutions, local and regional administrations and NGOs jointly address environmental challenges in their localities and seek solutions. Some of these Centres have already demonstrated their potential for integrating the concept of sustainable development in the everyday lives of the communities in the midst of which they are established. Following are only some examples of the wide spectrum of activities carried out by Aarhus Centres and PEICs.

1. Access to information

Common to all Aarhus Centres and PEICs, is the supply of free access to computers and internet services as well as environmental information and documentation for their visitors. These Centres host a number of thematic meetings and workshops that bring various stakeholders around the table and enable them to exchange information, experiences and perspectives.

Albania In collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Water Administration, the Aarhus Centre in Tirana publishes and widely disseminates a monthly electronic Environmental Bulletin in addition to its website, which includes, among others, information on environmental permits issued by the Ministry. Established under a Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry and the OSCE Presence in Albania, the three Aarhus Centres, the Advisory Board and the national Aarhus website support the Government of Albania in strengthening mechanisms for public participation and consultation in planning processes in line with the recommendations of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee (ACCC).



Armenia Based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Nature Protection, the Regional Governors and the OSCE Office in Yerevan, the Aarhus Centres in Armenia host a number of workshops and seminars on a wide range of topics from water to biodiversity, from renewable energy resources to climate change and ozone depletion, from environmental impact assessment to regional socio-economic development programmes. The Aarhus Centre website provides up to date information on the activities of the Centres, environmental legislation, and programmes and projects of the Ministry of Nature Protection and NGOs. The hot lines provided by Aarhus Centres enable citizens to report breaches to environmental legislation.

Azerbaijan The Aarhus Centres in Azerbaijan were established through an agreement between the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources and the OSCE Office in Baku. The environmental journalism initiative that was launched in 2007 by Aarhus Centres constitutes a practical example of facilitation of access to information, improving environmental communication and promoting public awareness. So far, over forty journalists received training on environmental issues through seminars and roundtables organized in three regions and in Baku. The wide coverage of this initiative in national and local media demonstrates the vital role of journalists as partners in implementing the Aarhus Convention.





Belarus In Belarus, the Aarhus Centre is a partnership between the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources and the OSCE Office in Minsk. The hot line of the Aarhus Centre in Minsk makes it possible to report any activity that may jeopardize the environment or any noncompliance with environmental legislation. For instance, this hot line was instrumental in launching a major public campaign against massive tree cutting envisaged in the framework of a construction project in the town of Borisov. This campaign of informed citizens, supported by the Ministry of Environment, led to a legal case, which resulted in the termination of the harmful project activities.

Georgia The Aarhus Centre and the PEICs are a joint initiative of the Ministry of Environment Protection and Natural Resources and the OSCE Mission to Georgia. In Georgia, the Aarhus Centre capitalizes on radio, as it is still the most widely used source of information for general public. The Centre launched a bi-monthly live radio program to discuss priority environmental issues. This initiative gave the opportunity to the public all around the country to get information on current environmental problems, to participate in the program and to express viewpoints and put questions to the experts, government representatives or NGOs. The Aarhus Centre website, on the other hand, is often the sole source of environmental information reaching out to a wide range of stakeholders.



Kyrgyzstan In Kyrgyzstan, the Aarhus Centre was established within the framework of an ENVSEC project supported by the OSCE Centre in Bishkek's Osh Field Office. The Aarhus Center in Osh focuses on four major areas: awareness raising on the Aarhus Convention; improving the youth's environmental awareness and its involvement in environmental protection activities; promoting environmental journalism; and fostering dialogue between the government and the civil society on environmental issues. The Aarhus Centre chose to utilize information boards in public places as a primary means for dissemination of environmental information in a city where access to computer and internet services is very limited. As a simple and cost-effective tool, the information boards have proved to be highly efficient in reaching out to the general public.

Tajikistan Aarhus Centres in Tajikistan, supported through an ENVSEC project, are the partnerships between the Government, NGOs and the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe. The Centres serve as environmental libraries, which are easily accessible to individuals, NGOs and other stakeholders. Information boards, the Aarhus Centre website and the media are the primary tools used for creating awareness and providing information on environmental issues. The environmental journalism competition and the environmental cinema week organized in Sughd Region contributed significantly to awareness raising within the region.



2. Public Participation

Public hearings are the primary mechanisms utilized by most of the Aarhus Centres and of the PEICs in contributing to the “public participation” pillar of the Aarhus Convention. They provide a means for communicating information between governments and citizens, interest groups, businesses and other parties. Through public hearings, Aarhus Centres provide a mechanism for obtaining input from all stakeholders about proposed regulations, permits or other changes that could affect the public.

Tajikistan The local environmental strategy and action plan for the city of Taboshar was approved on 27 December 2007. Initiated by the Aarhus Centre in Khujand, the strategy and action plan formulation process was conducted in a participatory manner involving all stakeholders. The inhabitants of Taboshar identified and prioritized the environmental problems and suggested necessary measures for inclusion in the action plan. The Aarhus Centre in Dushanbe continues to be a close partner to the Ministry of Environment in organizing public hearings on several environmental regulations.



Kyrgyzstan Building upon a number of trainings organized for the citizens of Osh on their environmental rights and responsibilities as per the Aarhus Convention, the Aarhus Centre hosted three major public hearings for projects dealing with waste management in Tashkomur, gold mining in Chatkal and cement factory construction in Kyzyl Kiya. The efficiency of these participatory processes encouraged the local government to make further use of the public hearing mechanism.

Georgia Upon request of the Ministry of Environment, the Aarhus Centre initiated a watchdog initiative for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process. Through this initiative, the Aarhus Centre conducted a review and monitoring of each stage of the EIA process (from planning to implementation) and identified pitfalls and drawbacks along with a set of recommendations for improvement. These recommendations paved the way for an improved EIA system in Georgia that incorporates more efficient public participation mechanisms.





Belarus In an attempt to protect their primary source of income, the beekeepers of the Treskovschina village of the Minsk district called the Aarhus Centre hot line and made a complaint on the inappropriate use of pesticides in a winter rape field which resulted in the massive death of bees in the region. It was based on this claim that the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection joined forces with the National Academy of Sciences and fielded an inspection group to review the case. This inspection proved the inconvenient use of these pesticides and called for measures by relevant authorities.

Azerbaijan The public hearings on the “Draft Law on Biodiversity Protection” and on the “National Implementation Report of Azerbaijan for the Aarhus Convention” are only some examples of the many activities conducted by the Aarhus Centres in Azerbaijan in promoting the second pillar of the Convention. The Centres in the Ganja and Gazakh regions continue to serve as venues for local stakeholders to jointly identify environmental challenges and to explore solutions.



Armenia The public hearing organized by the Yerevan Aarhus Centre on 30 November 2007 demonstrated once again the value of participatory approaches in environmental law-making. This time, it was the “Draft Hunting Law” that brought together the Ministry of Nature Protection, the National Academy of Science, members of the National Assembly, members of the Aarhus Centre Advisory Board, NGOs and the media. As a result of extensive discussions and consultations that took place in the public hearing, the interest groups came up with over hundred proposals for further improvement of the draft law and over sixty of these amendments were incorporated into the final text.

Albania Managing the problem of increasing quantities of waste is a challenge for any local authority but especially for the commune of Velipoja. Each year tens of thousands of tourists flock to enjoy the area’s sandy beaches and fresh sea air. However, the associated piles of waste produced by tourism cause significant concern among the community about the risks to public health and local tour operators are worried about spoiling the resort’s image. In November 2007, the Aarhus Centre brought together representatives from the local authority, local businesses and the local community to analyse the problem and agree on an action plan for improving the situation for the 2008 season.



3. Access to Justice

Initiatives in support of the third pillar remain a challenge both in terms of scope and quantity. Nevertheless, there is an increasing focus by Aarhus Centres on the provision of legal consultation services, promoting the Aarhus Convention and its principles among judges and prosecutors and enhancing the legal and judicial capacity of the countries in addressing environmental issues.

Armenia The Aarhus Centres, in co-operation with the Ministry of Justice, the Environmental Public Advocacy Centre and the OSCE Office in Yerevan, organized a series of seminars on the “access to justice” pillar. These seminars targeted primarily judges and prosecutors, government representatives, NGOs and the business community.



Georgia In an effort to contribute to the compliance of national legislation with the Aarhus Convention, the Aarhus Centre prepared a report on the “Legislative and Institutional Analysis of the Implementation of the Aarhus Convention in Georgia”. The Aarhus Centre also provides free legal consultations to individuals on issues related to the Aarhus Convention and offers trainings on environmental rights and obligations that are governed by the national environmental legislation and the Aarhus Convention.

Kyrgyzstan The Centre in Osh organized trainings for lawyers, judges and prosecutors to increase their awareness on the Aarhus Convention and to facilitate the implementation of the third pillar of the Convention in the region.



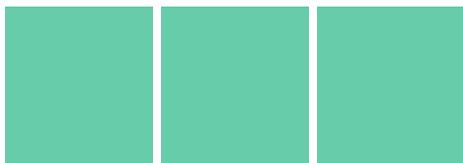
High-Level Judicial Workshop in Kiev, Ukraine

The High Level Judicial Workshop on Access to Justice in Environmental Matters for the Eastern Europe and South Caucasus region was held in Kiev on 4 and 5 June 2007. Aimed at raising awareness and knowledge of access to justice matters among the senior judiciary and at discussing ways and means to address identified implementation obstacles, the workshop brought together members of the highest levels of the judiciary from the region, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It was organized by the Convention Secretariat under the auspices of the UNECE in co-operation with the OSCE.

The workshop was the result of recommendations of the Task Force on Access to Justice, which called for organization of a series of sub-regional high-level judicial workshops on access to justice in countries with economies in transition to facilitate the national implementation of article 9 of the Convention. The main objectives were to increase awareness of the Convention among members of the judiciary and to enable them to exercise their discretion in a way that promotes effective implementation of article 9 of the Convention.

Attended by four to five senior judges from each of the six countries and representatives of the national judicial training centres and academies of justice (JTCs) of these countries as well as by several experts from Central and Eastern Europe and the European Union Forum of Judges for the Environment (EUFJE), the workshop was a breakthrough for the implementation of the “access to justice” pillar in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

In addition to achieving its objective of raised awareness and better knowledge of the Convention’s provisions among representative of the high-level judiciary, the workshop was instrumental in identifying major challenges to the implementation of access to justice in the region, initiating regional co-operation between legal experts and practitioners and promotion of better links between Aarhus Centres and the judiciary, in particular through the JTCs.



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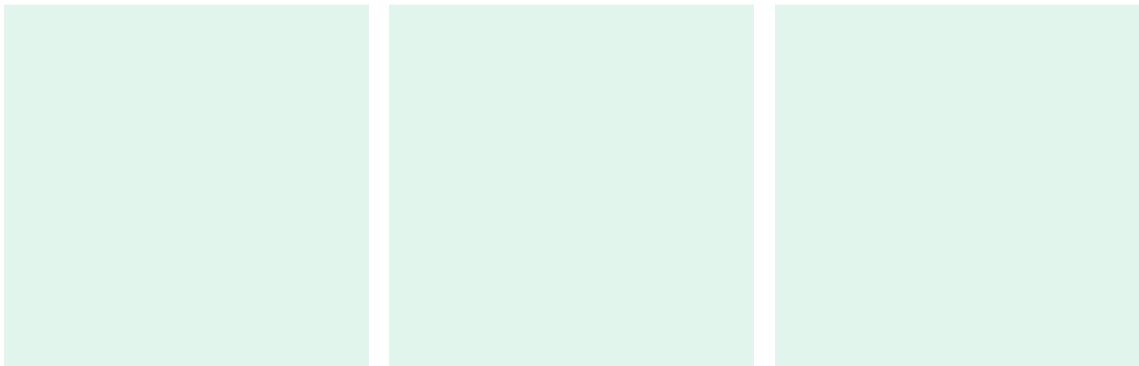
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The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe works for [stability, prosperity and democracy](#) in 56 States through political dialogue about shared values and through practical work that makes a lasting difference.

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