

Aarhus Convention Comes of Age

The time has come to extend its benefits around the world

(Chisinau, Moldova (July 2, 2011) -- The Fourth Session of the Meeting of the Parties (MoP) to the Aarhus Convention, which culminated yesterday in Chisinau, saw governments and non-governmental organizations debating on what is by now the regular business of Aarhus MoPs: mandates of task forces on information, participation and justice being renewed and revised, several Parties being publicly rebuked for being in non-compliance and asked to take corrective measures, and discussions on the content of the forthcoming work programme and how it will be funded.. The area on which the sharpest disagreement between governments and NGOs emerged was over the extent to which countries outside the UNECE region should be facilitated in acceding to the Convention – perhaps a sign that the Convention has come of age, and of a growing perception that now the time has come to share its benefits worldwide.

At the close of the meeting, Parties and stakeholders expressed broad satisfaction with the results of the three-day negotiations. Work plans for the upcoming period have been adopted. Problematic issues have been handled and or least described. Priorities for further development have been clarified. NGO proposals were often accepted, or taken into account, and implementation mechanisms were put in place.

The outcomes included a MOP-4 decision on access to environmental information which will support improved public access to product information and to environmental information generated by the private sector. The mandate of the Task Force on Public Participation, a body that was established last year at an extraordinary session of the Meeting of Parties on the initiative of European ECO Forum, has been expanded to enable the Task Force to examine a wider range of issues.

This Meeting of the Parties confirmed that European ECO Forum is a very necessary part of the Aarhus process. UNECE Executive Secretary Jan Kubis, speaking at the opening ceremony of the meeting's high-level segment, characterized European ECO Forum's activity as a "manifestation of environmental democracy".

The European ECO Forum calls upon the Parties and all participants of the meeting to pay special attention to difficult issues that did not obtain adequate responses yet, such as cases on persecution of environmental activists in Belarus, barriers in the way of justice, and the need to implement Aarhus compliance mechanisms in other international agreements.

"The most exciting work is now at the Compliance Committee, in my opinion," - said Prof. Svitlana Kravchenko, Vice-President of the Committee. "The increasing number of applications to the Compliance Committee confirms rising awareness of the Convention in the countries. We are happy that representatives of the countries where our experts found non-compliance cases / violation of the Convention agree with our conclusions and do their best to correct the situation," she said. As an example, the case on non-compliance in Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2005, is proceeding to a new stage. "There are systemic changes in the

country which begun due to the Aarhus Convention implementation and a real correction of the mistakes. It is a great victory for Ukrainian NGOs and European ECO Forum.”

“You are lucky to have the Aarhus convention in your region,” said Barbara Ruis of the UN Environment Programme, who addressed the MoP on UNEP’s recently adopted Bali Guidelines on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, which while global in scope are not legally binding.

We know, however, that we are not just lucky. Our successes are the achievements of one-and-a-half decades of hard and professional work done by many organizations and people. We are sure that the spirit of the Aarhus Convention needs to be spread to other regions of the world. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in a message to the Chisinau meeting said that “the Aarhus Convention is now more important than ever” and called it one of the main results of 1992 Rio Declaration.

European ECO Forum is sure that extending the principles of the Aarhus convention around the world is one of the most important task of our times. Several countries from outside the UNECE region have already stated interest in joining the Convention, but in each case this must be approved by the MoP. European ECO Forum considers this requirement to be an unnecessary deterrent. In an address to the high-level segment, European Environmental Bureau Secretary General Jeremy Wates called on the Parties to amend the Convention to remove the requirement of MoP approval, so that countries from outside the region would be able to accede on the same basis as countries within the region.

“They are invited to come in, but the door is half-closed, said Jeremy Wates. They are told, “You may come in, but not through the same door as the Europeans. The best gift the Aarhus Parties can give to Rio+20 is to make their accession to the Convention by States from other regions easier.”[1]

In the development of plans for the event, European ECO Forum encourages all stakeholders to pursue every opportunity to promote the spread of Principle 10 of the Aarhus Convention, in order to help more countries to have the benefits of access to information, public participation in decision- making and justice in environmental matters.

Ukraine offered to host the next session of the Meeting of the Parties. However, some other countries were also believed to be interesting in the hosting the meeting. It was therefore agreed to refer the decision on the venue for MoP-5 to the Convention’s main intersessional body, the Working Group of the Parties.

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[1] Rio+ 20, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 4-6, 2012