



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

CEP/WG.5/2000/11
2 May 2000

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Meeting of the Signatories to
the Convention on Access to Information,
Public Participation in Decision-making and
Access to Justice in Environmental Matters
(Second meeting, Dubrovnik, Croatia, 3-5 July 2000)
(Item 5 (h) of the provisional agenda)

**FURTHERING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AARHUS CONVENTION
THROUGH THE USE OF ELECTRONIC TOOLS AND MEDIA**

**Discussion paper by the European ECO Forum,
the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe
and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP/INFOTERRA)**

Introduction

"Using new electronic technologies can become a major tool in giving the public easy, cheap, direct access to information that the authorities hold. Using electronic means, in a sophisticated manner, is the answer to those countries' fear that they cannot provide the necessary manpower to respond to the needs of the public for information and participation in more bureaucratic manners." - John Hontelez, Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau, Environment for Europe Conference, Aarhus, Denmark, June 1998.

"Governments that fail to take advantage of the web will not only miss out on huge savings in the cost of transactions, but they will become less and less visible within society, and arguably therefore less influential and effective." - Patrick Dunleavy, Professor of Government, London School of Economics, quoted in the Financial Times, 15 February 2000.

1. Technology today is well ahead of much of the legislation and practice regarding access to and dissemination of information. Yet many citizens, governments and businesses are already part of an open information society that uses electronic media like e-mail, the Internet, cellular phones, display boards and digital television to access and propagate information. Increasing amounts of information are stored and transferred electronically.

2. Environmental information is no exception, and the technology provides opportunities for efficient, comprehensive, and timely provision of relevant information. For example, just one electronic copy on a Web site can enable immediate access by a virtually unlimited number of people. There can be little doubt that the use of electronic media and tools will increasingly play a role in communications between governments, authorities and the public. From the points of view of both applicant and supplier, the electronic transfer of data, information and documents can increase the capacity to handle and process information. Furthermore, public participation itself could be encouraged by the appropriate use of electronic tools.

3. This paper therefore aims to:

- Describe elements in the Convention where electronic tools are required or could be useful;
- Discuss the use of national Web gateways to information, documents and participatory processes themselves (annex I);
- Highlight some existing good practices, demonstrating the potential for increasing capacity to handle and process data, information requests and participatory processes (annex II);
- Advocate the establishment of an expert group or task force to promote the implementation of the Convention through the use of appropriate electronic tools.

Elements in the Convention

4. The Aarhus Convention has already recognized the importance of electronic tools. Within the preamble to the Convention, the importance of making use of electronic or other future forms of communication is noted (preambular paragraph 15). The text of the Convention (art. 2, para. 3) expressly includes electronic forms in the definition of environmental information. Article 5, paragraph 3, also requires that "environmental information progressively becomes available in electronic databases which are easily accessible to the public through public telecommunications networks" and names some types of information which may be suitable for this. Article 4, paragraph 1 (b), refers to the duty (with exceptions) to supply information and copies of actual documentation "in the form requested". And article 5, paragraph 9, on pollution inventories or registers specifically requires the use of "computerized and publicly accessible" databases.

5. Aside from the specific items referred to in article 5, paragraphs 3 and 9, articles 3 to 9 cover various information needs which may be suitable for the application of electronic tools. Some (non-exhaustive) examples would be:

- Art. 3 - public assistance, guidance, education and awareness with respect to all three pillars of the Convention;
- Art. 4 - provision of environmental information to the public;
- Art. 5 - collection and dissemination of environmental information, including items such as state-of-the-environment reports, facts and analyses for major environmental policy proposals, legislation and policy documents;
- Art. 6 - information on proposed activities, decision-making processes and draft decisions, environmental impact statements, receipt of comments and prompt notification of the decision;
- Art. 7 - provision of information on plans, programmes and policies;
- Art. 8 - publication of draft rules, opportunity for public comment;
- Art. 9 - information on access to administrative and judicial procedures, decisions of courts and other bodies, information on legislation enacted with respect to this pillar.

6. For example, under article 6, environmental impact statements (EISs) should be available for public inspection free of charge. EISs are becoming very comprehensive and complicated documents, often running to over 200 pages with colour illustrations, geo-referenced information, detailed maps, etc. Until such time as public authorities make it mandatory for developers to submit EISs in Web-compatible formats to permit Web access to the complete EISs, the development of databases of summary information for Web publication could at least provide the public with access to information about EISs. A comprehensive index could be produced on, say, a weekly basis. This index could be organized in three ways: by planning authority, by name of developer and by category of development. These indexes could lead to further background information, and either the full EIS if available in a Web format, or to information on where to view the complete document.

7. Furthermore, not only could a Web site provide access to information and to documents related to decision-making processes, but could encourage public participation itself through interactive forums such as bulletin boards or e-mail interfaces. A description of such a tool is provided in annex I.

Costs and benefits

8. It is apparent that there is a huge disparity in resources and telecommunication infrastructures between countries across the UN/ECE region. Nevertheless, many countries' public authorities have already begun to use electronic tools successfully, and some of the case studies in annex II show that low-cost efforts can still support electronic access. Further

exploration of the problems and solutions could help to increase capacity and to maximize the gains to be had from investments in these tools, and lead to cooperative efforts across the region.

9. Benefits to be had from using electronic media to support the implementation of the Convention are outlined through case studies in annex II. The case studies indicate how such tools support the development of an "information society", leading towards transparency in decision-making, community involvement, informed decision-making, compliance with national and international legislation, and integration with international reporting requirements.

Recommendations for the activities of an expert group or task force

10. This paper therefore calls for the Meeting of the Signatories to establish an expert group or task force that will work towards producing guidelines on the use of electronic information and tools to implement both specific items and general provisions of the Convention. Specifically the group could:

(a) Assist in exchanging information on the use and development of electronic tools and information management tools for the collection and dissemination of information, and for public participation;

(b) Identify the appropriateness and advantages of electronic availability of draft and final documents, and of current and historical environmental information in various contexts relating to the Convention;

(c) Explore how to improve public participation through the use of electronic means;

(d) Provide recommendations for best practice mechanisms available for electronic access and dissemination, and public participation;

(e) Exchange and gather information on emerging technologies such as wireless applications technology (cellular telephony) and digital/cable television;

(f) Explore low-cost solutions that may be used in those regions where public telecommunications networks and infrastructure are less well developed (e.g. information kiosks, telecottages, and on-line centres within public libraries, community centres etc.);

(g) Provide examples of clear language and user-friendly software used for the collection, storage, presentation and dissemination of environmental information and knowledge management;

(h) Encourage training, workshops and exchanges for public authorities at all levels and non-governmental organizations on the use of electronic tools and their benefits, using actual examples, case books and guides etc.;

(i) Explore the provision of "real-time" information and its potential benefits and uses;

(j) Assist in developing national legislation compliant with the Convention;

(k) Share information on existing efforts and assist in developing guidelines for harmonizing data collection and reporting at a national and international level;

(l) Examine the available and potential mechanisms for increasing funding for the implementation of electronic tools from international sources (e.g. the European Commission's Information Society Technologies R&D Programme), and from national sources for public authorities;

(m) Identify technical, institutional and market challenges to the wider implementation and use of electronic tools in information collection, dissemination and access.

11. The expert group or task force could consist of experienced information managers and individuals knowledgeable in modern information and communication technologies. The following groups could be represented in the expert group or task force: public authorities, non-governmental organizations, centres of excellence, international/regional organizations and the corporate sector.

12. Signatory countries of the Aarhus Convention with significant experience in this field would be invited to consider leading and supporting the proposed expert group or task force.

Annex I

USE OF ELECTRONIC TOOLS TO ASSIST WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF ARTICLES 6 AND 7 OF THE AARHUS CONVENTION

1. Discussion of the use of electronic tools to assist with the implementation of articles 6 and 7 of the Aarhus Convention can benefit from a concept of an Aarhus Convention portal Web site for each country. This Web site would act as a gateway to provide citizens with a single entry point to environmental information at the national level (including information supplied within the provisions of the information pillar of the Convention).

2. One component of this Web site would be an "interactive public participation forum" - a mechanism to provide the public with, for example, substantive documents on specific activities, plans and programmes relating to the environment, but more importantly, to enable the public to comment interactively on proposals in an open and transparent manner. In practice, the forum would be a dedicated Web server incorporating the following features:

- A system for registering subscribers either via a Web login interface or e-mail message for non-Web users,
- A folder containing the substantive reference documents on the proposal, viewable on-line in non-editable (PDF) format and downloadable,
- Multiple folders for different proposals, accessible via a proposal index;
- A facility to enable subscribers to post comments on a bulletin board, e.g. comment on the substantive documents or comment on other subscribers' comments;
- A system for tracking the chain of comments, i.e. the 'thread';
- Subscriber access restrictions, e.g. read-only access or write access to the bulletin board;
- Automatic posting of messages (no filtering by moderator) or moderator-approved messages (becomes public only when approved by moderator);
- An e-mail interface for the non-Web user (user receives copies of all messages posted and can submit comments by e-mail),
- A chat feature that can facilitate real-time conferencing among subscribers.

3. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), through its involvement with the Global Environment Facility (GEF), has invested in the development of such an interactive forum on the Web, in this case to mobilize the scientific and technical community in support of GEF. This forum (URL: <http://gef-forum.unep.org>) has the same functionality as the proposal for an

interactive public participation forum described above and has been used effectively to obtain feedback on issues related to GEF. With minor alterations, it can be made available to other interested parties. The third party (e.g. a local authority or government ministry) would have to pay a software licence fee of approximately US\$ 1000.

Annex II

BRIEF CASE STUDIES - POSSIBLE MODELS FOR ELECTRONIC IMPLEMENTATION

1. The following brief descriptions demonstrate specific examples of electronic information technologies which have been used to:

- increase capacity to meet public demand for environmental information, efficiently and effectively;
- contribute towards the development of an information society;
- facilitate community involvement and support transparency in decision-making;
- improve internal data access;
- inform decision-making.

Several of the projects show the increasing use of the Internet by public authorities. The huge proliferation over recent years of Internet domains, globally, has been paralleled by an increase in the number of users.

2. While access to a personal computer and reliable telecommunications networks are still hurdles to many members of the public, the emergence of **wireless application technologies** and third-generation mobile telephony will significantly broaden the opportunity to access environmental data on-line via the ubiquitous **cellular phone**. Furthermore, one town in the United States recently made an effort to ensure that all citizens were guaranteed Web access via **cable television** networks. Fears of being caught on the wrong side of the so-called "digital divide" constituted a critical driving force.

3. For those countries where such options for public access are not currently feasible, the case studies below outline a number of alternatives ranging from **information kiosks** to **telecottages**, **libraries** and **message boards**.

I. ARTICLE 4 - ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

A. Environmental Information Service (ENFO), Department of the Environment and Local Government, Ireland

Contact: Noel Hughes, information scientist (noel@enfo.ie); Web site: www.enfo.ie.

4. ENFO is the Environmental Information Service of the Irish Department of the Environment and Local Government. It was established in September 1990, and meets both EC Directive 90/313/EEC and article 4 of the Aarhus Convention in responding to requests for information from the public. ENFO is a "one-stop" shop for all environmental information requests. The shop itself can be visited in person (in the city centre of Dublin), but ENFO also has a Web site and responds to inquiries by e-mail, fax and letter.

Electronic services like e-mail and the Internet have proved valuable to the Government. The Web site includes access to the full text of some 100 ENFO leaflets and details of some 250 videos that are available for loan. The site enables visitors to handle many of their own information requests, by accessing the needed information online. ENFO has offered both cost savings and increased public awareness, and handled 26,000 inquiries in the first three months of 2000.

B. Miljobutikken, Ministry of Environment and Energy, Denmark

Contact: Dorte Bennedbaek (Dbe@mem.dk); Web site:
www.mem.dk/butik/ukindex.htm

5. The Danish Ministry of Environment and Energy established its Miljobutikken or "environmental shops" following the Rio Declaration in 1992. As the Ministry is organized within three agencies and three scientific institutions across the country, it is not always easy for the public to know where to find relevant environmental information. The shop is therefore a "gateway" to all these institutions. It provides an information service, telephone hotline and bookshop for business and tradespeople, teachers, ordinary citizens, students, NGOs, politicians, etc. The Butik also communicates central government decisions to citizens.

6. The Miljobutik can also be accessed on-line via the Internet. The site was established in part in response to the national strategy for the use of electronic publishing and enables visitors to access electronic documents. Free brochures, action plans, legislation and policy papers, such as documents submitted to the Folketing (parliament) can be accessed on-line. Increasing numbers of customers communicate electronically with the shop, so it is extremely important to host an on-line service beside a telephone hotline and a physical presence.

7. Denmark has a tradition of openness in public administration. Most ministries, counties and municipalities have their own Web pages and most public information is in both print and electronic forms. The trend therefore is quite clear. Four to five years ago, Internet pages and electronic publications were expensive to produce. Now these forms are cheaper than print, the software tools are increasingly easy to use and most colleagues are able to produce electronic documents themselves. Plain-text Web pages are already relatively cheap and easy, and the growth of the information society will undoubtedly bring down the price of multi-media pages in the future.

C. ENVIROCITY, City of Munich, Environment and Health Department

Contact: Markus Spring (Markus.Spring@mindless.com); Web site:
www.muenchen.de/referat/rgu

8. The City of Munich relies on a variety of electronic tools to store and disseminate environmental data. This contributes to improved internal access to data, informed environmental decision-making, political transparency, and improved public awareness of environmental issues.

9. Besides the City's Internet Web site, the City of Munich uses "Infokiosks" - publicly accessible computer terminals that offer community information. These are located in places such as the town hall in the city centre, the metro, and within community centres. They offer access, via the Internet, to the City's digital environment atlas (which contains more than 70 maps and text describing the City's environmental situation); a catalogue of environmental information sources; brochures/publications; air pollution information; and on-line/e-mail feedback mechanisms.

10. City "Info Columns" (public information screens) offer similar data, often on 3m x 4m screens in the city's subway stations.

11. The above measures help to cut costs, for instance:

- Data management and handling require fewer man-hours;
- Information is more widely disseminated at relatively low cost;
- Data are rapidly available and more easily accessible, saving time and money;
- Understanding and awareness of health and environmental issues is improved.

This last point is particularly important. While a strict cost-benefit analysis is difficult, a comparison of the cost of distributing the environmental atlas shows that the printed version cost some 40,000 euros, while the entire electronic health and environment system costs 150,000 euros. More importantly, however, by raising public awareness of environmental issues, the City hopes to bring about a change in citizen behaviour, greater acceptance of environmental policy and with that a reduction in environmental stress and in pressure on resources.

D. Interactive Health Ecology Access Links (IHEAL)

Contact: Michael Stanley-Jones (msjones@igc.org); Web site: www.iheal.org

12. The NGO Network IHEAL is dedicated to improving the presentation of information about environment and health to the public. Its "Projekt REZZO" - the Register of Emissions and Air Pollution Sources (www.ecn.cz/rtk/gis/rezzo_le/) displays the most common air pollutants in the Czech Republic on an Internet map server. The IHEAL homepage provides user-

friendly links to some 600 electronic databases and other resources for environment and health information.

II. ARTICLE 5 - COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

A. Environmental Information System of Prague (IOZIP), Czech Republic
Contact: Jaroslav Solc, Institute of Municipal Informatics of the City of Prague (IMIP) (JSolc@imip.mepnet.cz); Web site: www.praha-mesto.cz

13. IOZIP is the City of Prague's Environmental Information System. It serves as a tool for collecting and processing municipal environmental data, and standardizes them for public dissemination. The system stores different sets of environmental data relating to air, water, soil, landscape and noise and makes them available to experts, decision makers and the public. The system was first conceived during the late 1980s, and long before access-to-information legislation had been passed. It now conforms to Czech Act No.123/1998 on the Environmental Right to Know (which implements the access-to-information pillar of the Aarhus Convention) as well as contributing to the Czech National Policy on the Information Society of 1998. Today the system uses the Internet to disseminate environmental data, and uses modern technologies like geographic information systems (GIS) and electronic databases to store state-of-the-environment data. These complement traditional hardcopy data sources (annual reports).

14. The success of IOZIP can be recognized in part from the popularity of its use. But it is also significant that the City authorities attach an increasing level of importance to the system (and electronic tools in general), and wish to upgrade and expand the system in the light of growing urban environmental concerns. The City is also developing a digital environmental atlas.

15. The City of Prague recently joined a pan-European consortium in a new research and development project co-funded by the European Union that will implement an "environmental decision support system". The new system will tap into an existing network of urban air quality and traffic flow sensors that will collect and feed near real-time information into a database system. The system will process the data and help manage traffic flow and achieve air quality targets. The system will make these data publicly accessible via the IOZIP Internet Web site.

B. Austrian Federal Environment Agency

Contact: Johannes Mayer, Head of Dept. International Organisations,
Information; Web site: www.ubavie.gv.at

16. The active publication of available information on the environment is an important part of the information policy of the Umweltbundesamt (Federal Environment Agency). This is done in the traditional way through more than 200 paper publications and the "Umweltkontrollbericht", a state-of-the-environment report presented every three years to the Parliament by the Minister of the Environment.

17. An ever-larger part of the public information provided by the Agency can be retrieved from its Web site. There is information on the state of the environment (air quality and air pollutants, water quality, waste, contaminated sites, nature conservation, etc.), on different environmental registers and the publications of the Agency, as well as daily news - which is also archived - on a wide variety of topics.

18. Providing on-line access to environmental data via the Internet means that the most recent data are available at any time to those looking for information. The Austrian Federal Environment Agency provides public access to the Austrian Air Quality Database. Data are permanently being transferred to this database from about 150 measuring sites of the nine provincial monitoring networks. A few stations - mostly background monitoring for international programmes and for tracing transboundary air pollution - are managed directly by the Agency.

19. While the Austrian air quality experts of the federal and provincial governments have direct access to more complicated menus arranging this wealth of data, the Internet interface has been designed to meet the information needs of the general public. Using maps and menus, the public can choose locations and pollutants (ozone, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide or particulate matter) and receive almost instant information about whether the concentrations measured might be of concern or not. The on-line access provided to air quality data has been presented several times as an example of good practice by the European Environment Agency.

20. Recently, a further advanced and integrated type of access to environmental data via the Internet has been made available through the Agency's geographic information system (GIS). The prototype offers integrated access to data linked to geographically coded objects, like air quality monitoring stations, contaminated sites, enterprises participating in the European Union's eco-audit-scheme, etc. The Internet user can navigate with the help of maps on different scales, which are instantly created by the GIS server according to the user's specific request.

C. Drinking Water Inspectorate, United Kingdom

Contact: Web site: ww.dwi.detr.gov.uk/h2oinfo.htm

21. The private water companies in England and Wales are regulated by the Government's Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI). Since 1996, all companies have supplied their compliance monitoring data on drinking-water quality (each individual measurement) to DWI on diskettes in a standardized format. According to DWI, this has been an essential development. It speeds up the assessment of compliance with EU and national legislation, permits analysis of trends in water quality, enables audits of the companies and their data to be carried out, and makes compiling the DWI annual report much more efficient. Summary statistics and information on each company are also transferred to the DWI Web site.

D. Friends of the Earth, United Kingdom

Contact: Web site: www.foe.co.uk/factorywatch

22. The annual pollution records of major industries in England and Wales can be found on the "Factory Watch" Web site of the environmental NGO Friends of the Earth. The site uses database and GIS technology to display interactive maps and search forms. Users can find data on individual industrial sites, for example by entering a postcode or by clicking on the maps. Further links indicate the possible health hazards of chemicals. The system should eventually cover all the industries regulated under the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive, and could link to documentation such as applications and permits if these were available in Web-compatible format.

III. ARTICLE 6 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DECISIONS ON SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

A. City of Paide, Estonia

Contact: Web site: www.paide.ee

23. The City of Paide opened up a discussion with its citizens regarding the selection of a water catchment area to serve the town's water needs. The existing water-supply reservoir was contaminated and in 1995 discussion was initiated on the location of a new reservoir. It was decided to use an on-line chat session on the Internet as one mechanism for public participation (complementing other methods such as public meetings). The City government did not have an Internet homepage at that time, but the homepage of a local information technology company could be used. Following an announcement and an agreed date and time, the discussion took place and involved the head of the City Council, the head of the Clean Water Commission, an environmental inspector, eight citizens, and the City government (September 1998).

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24. Much of the information needs of article 6 can easily be made available via the Internet, either in so-called full text or in downloadable file formats. This can be especially useful for those who cannot make it to a city government office to view plans/proposals during office hours. Furthermore, public comments need not only be collected during a public meeting but could be submitted to the city government or other decision maker via an on-line noticeboard. Decisions can also be relayed to the public using these means.

IV. ARTICLE 7 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CONCERNING PLANS, PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES RELATING TO THE ENVIRONMENT

A. Saarbrücken/Moselle, Germany/France

Contact: Web site www-temsisi.dfki.uni-sb.de

25. The communities of the SaarMoselle region practise an active and open information policy. While the municipal authorities rely a great deal on the Internet to disseminate environmental information, they also recognize that there are members of the public without Internet access. For this reason, a network of information kiosks was developed and located at town halls and other central administrative institutions. The SaarMoselle regional authorities and data suppliers cooperated to determine what kinds of environmental data could be made available electronically, while the local authorities and citizen groups discussed their most important data requirements. Two types of kiosks were installed:

(a) "**The Public Kiosk**" makes available the same information to the public as can be accessed on-line. This includes environmental data such as air and water quality, maps, etc. The kiosk enables a form of tele-cooperation through a discussion forum using message boards where users can post comments and reactions on environmental issues and on specific investments and policies (including Agenda 21 policies). Furthermore, the kiosk offers moderated discussion lists and also "portraits" of citizen organizations, communities, authorities and enterprises;

(b) "**Administrative Kiosks**" are hosted within environmental administrations and offer a transboundary networked system of kiosks that enable local and regional environmental authorities to videoconference, share access to regional databases, discuss developments or incidents which require immediate action, and take rapid decisions. While more closely related to article 5 on the collection and exchange of environmental information, it nevertheless presents a valuable electronic mechanism for improving cooperation and thereby strengthens the decision-making process.

B. Telecottages and the Telecottage Network;

Contact: Tonu Otsason, Estonian Kodukant Village Movement
(t6nu@palfhs.edu.ee)

26. To ensure that rural communities in Estonia did not find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide, a number of them pursued proactively membership of the information society. A means to achieve this was to strengthen cooperation with rural town councils and to go on-line and communicate with other rural communities elsewhere. The environment is a common concern to many in Estonia and so this provided a common theme around which to cooperate and launch the telecottage concept.

27. The telecottage is little more than a simple room, located in either a shop, school, library, home, or village centre. Access is usually provided free of charge. Nevertheless, telecottags have proved an invaluable means for raising public awareness, stimulating community involvement, and encouraging participation in the information society.

28. The first telecottages were established in 1993 as a means to provide people, farmers and the public with information and consultation opportunities. By 1998, the network of telecottages had grown to around 32. Today, they serve as the main focal point for public access to personal computers and the Internet and provide information on the state of the environment, news, policies and plans, public transport information, tourist information over computer networks. Telecottages also provide a means for the local council to involve the public in decision-making processes such as Agenda 21.

V. ARTICLE 8 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION DURING THE PREPARATION OF EXECUTIVE REGULATIONS AND/OR GENERALLY APPLICABLE LEGALLY BINDING NORMATIVE INSTRUMENTS

A. Environment Ministry, Bulgaria

Contact: Web site: www.moew.govrn.bg

29. The rather new Web site of the Bulgarian Environment Ministry has a section entitled "Dialogue with the public" in which comments and proposals can be made on the further development and implementation of environmental policy on-line and via e-mail. At the time of writing, this includes a draft regulation for public access to environmental information on which public comments are invited.

B. Green Spider Network, Hungary

Contact: Agoston Nagy (agoston@zpok.hu)

30. The Green Spider Telecommunications Network was created by environmental NGOs in 1992, before the Internet was widely available, in order to improve

information flow and cooperation among organizations, including NGOs, government, academic institutions and others. Within the first few years, Green Spider was used on a daily basis by some 500 organizations, including all major environmental groups in Hungary. The Network provided e-mail capacity and a discussion forum for its users.

31. The Hungarian Ministry of Environment also joined the Network and began to regularly post draft regulations and funding proposals. Since 1995, the Green Spider Network has become an important information channel for the Ministry of Environment to maintain contact with NGOs. During the past four years, the Ministry has consequently loaded over 60 legislation drafts and funding proposals, and submitted over 300 postings to different on-line electronic conferences. Many of those postings were responses to questions posted by NGOs.

32. Thus a sort of informal bilateral communication was established, although all postings from the Ministry were posted by one individual (a policy decision of the Ministry).

33. There was less reaction from NGOs than expected when drafts were published, although a few organizations submitted their feedback and proposals regarding the actual drafts. This indicates that this is a bilateral task to learn how to meaningfully cooperate. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the electronic network of Green Spider has proved to be a useful, catalytic tool in improving communication between NGOs and the government, and in providing a useful means for public participation in achieving compliance with article 8 of the Convention.