UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Working Group for the Preparation of the
First Meeting of the Parties to the
Convention on Access to Information,
Public Participation in Decision-making and
Access to Justice in Environmental Matters
(First meeting, Geneva, 28-30 November 2001)

**WORKSHOP ON THE USE OF ELECTRONIC TOOLS IN THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AARHUS CONVENTION**
(Arendal, Norway, 8-9 March 2001)

Background

1.   Pursuant to paragraph 57 of report of the second meeting of the Signatories
(CEP/WG.5/2000/2), Norway hosted a workshop of the Electronic Tools task force on the
topic of furthering the use of electronic tools in the implementation of the Aarhus Convention. The aim of
the workshop was to present and analyse problems and needs in the use of electronic tools in the
implementation of the Aarhus Convention and to discuss cases of successes and failures as well as
newly emerging initiatives.

2.   The workshop took place on 8-9 March 2001 in Arendal, Norway. It was chaired by the task
force lead country Austria with the support of Norway, and organized by UNEP/GRID-Arendal. The
Norwegian government provided financial assistance to 21 participants representing governments and
NGOs from Central and Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States.

This document has not been formally edited.

GE.01-32277

3.   The workshop was attended by representatives from the Governments of Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Norway, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan and Yugoslavia.

4.   Representatives of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the European Commission, the European Environment Agency, the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), Interactive Health Ecology Access Links (IHEAL), the European ECO Forum, University of Bruxelles and World Resources Institute also attended.

The workshop

5.   Plenary presentations by a selection of countries and organizations outlined how electronic tools are used by authorities and NGOs in the fields of access to environmental information and public participation.

6.   Discussions were organized in four groups and were based on plenary presentations, experiences of the participants and the result of a survey among the UNECE countries on the needs, priorities, challenges and obstacles in the use of electronic tools, carried out by the REC prior to the workshop. Two of the groups concentrated on the use of electronic tools in the provision of access to and dissemination of environmental information (articles 4 and 5 of the Convention), and two on public participation and access to justice (articles 6 to 9 of the Convention).

Conclusions

7.   The four groups came up with a number of priority needs and challenges in the use of electronic tools and recommendations for future actions that could be taken to further the implementation of the Convention by means of information and telecommunication technologies. The task force concluded that future efforts should be concentrated on inter alia:

- Raising awareness of the Convention and the opportunities it offers to citizens using electronic media and other means;
- Addressing and analysing end-users' needs and preferences regarding accessibility of electronic environmental information;
- Developing common approaches and tools for disseminating environmental information in particular via the Internet, including establishing environmental gateways as user-friendly access mechanisms;
- Building capacities of public authorities in the use of electronic tools;
- Working together with NGOs, the mass media and other users to enhance the quality of and access to environmental information;

- Promoting public access centres in countries with inadequate electronic infrastructures, and in general the use of complementary non-electronic means to promote access to information and public participation.

8.   A full list of possible actions to further the use of electronic tools in the implementation and promotion of the Convention, partly reworked and regrouped under main areas, is included in annex I to this report.

Information resources

9.   The REC has established a web site www.rec.org/e-aarhus to support the work of the task force. The website features a final version of the needs, priorities, challenges and obstacles survey and a series of recommendations based on the survey (www.rec.org/e-aarhus/Recommendations.html). The website also features a case study gallery with a number of examples of ways to use electronic tools and other media in the implementation of the Convention. (The case studies are also available in paper format.) The task force agreed to finalize the conclusions of the workshop in a virtual environment via an electronic discussion list hosted by the REC, called E-AARHUS-L@rec.org.

10.   Reflecting the nature of the subject matter of the task force, the proceedings of the workshop were filmed and broadcasted online via the website of UNEP/GRID-Arendal (www.grida.no/enrin/aarhus/) where they are currently available together with the full list of participants and other background information.

Annex I

POSSIBLE ACTIONS TO FURTHER THE USE OF ELECTRONIC TOOLS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION AND PROMOTION OF THE CONVENTION

I   GENERAL SUPPORT TO THE CONVENTION

Raise awareness about the Convention

- Publish the Convention on web sites of all relevant national authorities, assure national language version, with summary of main points and rights in the light of the national context – give practical examples with reference to concrete national law citations).
- Publish national citizen guide (what is environmental information, access to information resources, public participation procedures, access to justice) on the rights under the Aarhus Convention.
- Carry out activities to explain the essence and scope of "environmental information" (e.g. including health-relevant issues).
- Develop education packages (schools curricula) for teachers/schools/students/media on Aarhus Convention in co-operation between ministries of environment and education.
- Develop media packages on the Aarhus Convention.
- Promote of the Convention through traditional media (develop a model for how to create a campaign based on the Aarhus Convention).
- Complete the film on the Aarhus Convention to facilitate the production of country specific television programmes to promote the Aarhus Convention.

II   DIRECT SUPPORT TO IMPLEMENTING THE CONVENTION

Develop overall communication strategies focusing on user needs and involving the public
- Encourage administrations (at all levels) to develop communication strategies to reach and involve the public adapted to local priority issues (e.g. agreements between ministries and local authorities on how to work with NGOs, schools and other target groups).
- Combine use of traditional and electronic tools (promote and facilitate the use of electronic tools when using traditional tools, e.g. paper sources, seminars and education)
- Develop a methodology to assess and analyze users' needs to define priorities in the access to electronic information.
- Review existing surveys or conducting a specific survey/needs assessment of UNECE countries in particular with respect to Article 40 of Agenda 21, its indicators and their application in UNECE countries.

- Promote the interactive use of the Internet as a two-way communication medium to invite and encourage public feedback: Develop tools to ask public for suggestions, for comments on policy documents, plans, etc. to engage public in decision-making process
- Develop schools-based monitoring and GIS mapping programmes, in cooperation with research institutions, local and environmental authorities, and public health authorities.
- Explore ways to integrate public participation in data collection without compromising data quality.

Respond to public demand
- Improve readiness of administration to answer information requests from the public and provide active assistance.
- Create information centres in ministries and local authorities or identify single points of contact (Call Center, Environment Shop) providing public access to environmental information and responsible for publishing information and adding value especially for local communities.
- Establish educational centres or NGO centres for environmental information.
- Use post offices and similar institutions (e.g. municipal offices) to alert authorities of activities likely to affect the local environment.

Ensure supply of relevant information by public authorities
- Improve the timeliness of electronically available environmental data
- Provide web sites with overview on environmental information services (Integrating national Portal) and tools to guide the users' search for environmental information and make the source of data/information visible (meta databases/catalogue of data sources for information held by public authorities, search engines).
- Create Standard portal website in each country providing information on Aarhus Convention (with a standard name e.g. eco-info.Ukraine, environment.Moldova...).
- Promote electronic access to information concerning transboundary environmental issues.
- Support the development of electronic tools to support the implementation of pollutant release and transfer registers (once the PRTR group has agreed on the content aspects).
- Ensure free public access to legislation and guarantee public access to electronic information free of charge.
- Develop well-explained, understandable data/information services for users.
- Ensure daily/weekly environmental report on television (similar to weather forecast)
- Develop detailed state-of-the-Environment reports and make them available inter alia on the Internet in English and national language.
- Implement red light alert system to warn citizens of disasters and incidents.
- Ensure that information relevant to specific areas be given in those areas.
- Make available on public website (e.g. ministry of the environment) a database of national laws and legislation under preparation, in accordance with national legislative procedures.

Support public participation and access to justice

- Develop specific information technology tools for facilitating public participation.
- Share positive experiences to motivate the public to use opportunities for participation (in co-operation with NGOs).
- Guarantee notification of public on participation opportunities (develop and promote public participation portals/entry sites, with non-technical user information, develop templates to facilitate participation and processing of comments).
- Guarantee that public inputs are duly registered, assessed/commented and integrated by the decision-maker, publish electronically comments from the public and reasoned answers from authorities (most efficiently on simply designed web-pages or bulletin board).
- Archive electronically all participation documents for public access.
- Mobilize NGOs and civil society to encourage participation.
- Ensure that the interested public and those potentially affected by a planned measure can participate (assess the broadcasting needs).
- Promote effective public participation in development of binding norms and decisions also at regional/local level.
- Link community level participation with global electronic resources.
- Reserve space on governmental websites for communications from the public, links to NGOs etc. (administration should identify NGOs relevant to the Aarhus Convention process)
- Develop low-level arbitration and appeals procedures mechanisms with opportunity for IT use and standard electronic templates.

III   ADVANCING THE USE OF INFORMATION TOOLS

Raise awareness about the potential of information tools
- Use traditional means of communication to reach the public and especially members of NGOs to increase awareness of electronic tools.
- Exchange know-how from west to east regarding innovative use of telecommunications networks (railway lines, electricity grids).
- Provide technical assistance/capacity building for users and suppliers in IT, e.g. in web building and CD-ROM design.
- Share positive experiences from integrating disparate electronic datasets for dissemination (in information systems/databases, data warehouses).
- Share experiences on moving from paper to electronic systems (incl. assessment of benefits for and pressures on the environment).
- Share positive experiences of successful PR for promoting the use of electronic tools.

- Promote the official use of electronic documents by authorities and the use of publicly accessible electronic archives.
- Assure dissemination of best practices also in less developed countries.
- Promote knowledge about existing and newly developed software tools and applications (e.g. manual on how to build your own website) that could be downloaded electronically.
- Explore and promote the use of open source software, freeware applications (GIS, web design etc.) and fairly priced commercial software to increase effective accessibility of electronic tools.
- Maintain and extend the case study gallery (explore also non-Internet based examples)

Engage in resource mobilization and development
- Seek UNEP support for education in specific countries and produce packages on CD rom.
- Improve effective public access to the Internet by removing legal barriers, reducing excessive costs/taxes and/or bad connectivity/poor telephone lines hindering access to electronic tools
- Leverage equipment support, donation especially for NIS countries (utilizing spare equipment of western environment agencies and/or private corporations).
- Mobilize the necessary resources at Government and other levels to ensure the adequate capacities to access and produce electronic information (at international, national, regional and local levels).
- Participate in developing programmes for distributing spare equipment
- Seek sponsorship from IT industries (for example, Yahoo! software licenses program)

Network among relevant parties and institutions
- Develop Aarhus Convention web site portal at www.unece.org with links to national sites of NGOs, governments, etc.
- Portal website template for information retrieval (from the users point of view), drawing on existing experiences (and prepared together real users, NGOs and the public).
- Develop templates for access and distribution of information (PRTR etc.)
- Collect information from national environmental administrations on status and development plans of their web sites.
- Harmonize environmental technology, e.g. by ensuring existing multi-lingual thesauri like GEMET/Envoc are extended to other UNECE countries/languages (on CD-ROM and within Internet browser formats)
- Define and ensure minimal electronic information standards for all countries.