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in environmental matters

Compliance Committee**Fifty-sixth meeting**

Geneva, 28 February–3 March 2017

Item 9 of the provisional agenda

Communications from members of the public

**Findings and recommendations with regard to communication
ACCC/C/2013/81 concerning compliance by Sweden**

Adopted by the Compliance Committee on 18 November 2016

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I. Introduction

1. On 27 February 2013, a member of the public, Bernd Stümer (the communicant), submitted a communication to the Compliance Committee under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) alleging that Sweden had failed to comply with its obligations under the Convention. The communication alleges that the Party concerned fails to comply with articles 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the Convention both in relation to the permitting process for the issuance of permits for two wind turbines near the town of Strängnäs, Sweden, (Helgarö/Strängnäs wind turbines) and in general. The communication¹ alleges, among other things, that the Convention's provisions are consistently overridden with respect to building permits for wind turbines.²
2. At its fortieth meeting (Geneva, 25–28 March 2013), the Committee determined on a preliminary basis that the communication was admissible in accordance with paragraph 20 of the annex to decision I/7 of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention. Pursuant to paragraph 22 of the annex to decision I/7, the communication was forwarded to the Party concerned on 26 April 2013.
3. Between 26 April 2013 and 1 December 2015, the communicant and the Party concerned provided additional information and answered questions from the Committee on a number of occasions.
4. At its forty-seventh meeting (Geneva, 16–19 December 2014), the Committee provisionally scheduled that it would hold a hearing to discuss the substance of the communication at its forty-eighth meeting (Geneva, 24–27 March 2015).
5. The Committee held a hearing to discuss the substance of the communication at its forty-eighth meeting, with the participation of representatives of the communicant and the Party concerned. At the same meeting, the Committee confirmed the admissibility of the communication.
6. Following the hearing, the communicant and the Party concerned provided additional information and answered questions from the Committee on several occasions.
7. The Committee agreed its draft findings at its fifty-third meeting (Geneva, 21–24 June 2016), and in accordance with paragraph 34 of the annex to decision I/7, the draft findings were then forwarded for comments to the Party concerned and to the communicant on 29 June 2016. Both were invited to provide comments by 27 July 2016.
8. The communicant and the Party concerned provided comments on 9 August and 17 August 2016, respectively.
9. At its virtual meeting on 13 September 2016, the Committee proceeded to finalize its findings in closed session, taking account of the comments received. The Committee then adopted its findings through its electronic decision-making procedure on 18 November 2016 and instructed the secretariat to prepare official versions of its findings as a formal pre-session document for its fifty-sixth meeting and to ensure its availability in the three official languages of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

¹ Documents concerning this communication, including correspondence between the Committee, the communicant and the Party concerned, are available on a dedicated web page of the Committee's website (<http://www.unece.org/env/pp/compliance/compliancecommittee/81tables sweden.html>).

² See communication, p. 2, first to seventh paragraphs.

II. Summary of facts, evidence and issues³

A. Facts

10. On 10 January 2008, the Diocese of Strängnäs notified the Environment Committee in the Municipality of Strängnäs (*Miljö- och räddningsnämnden i Strängnäs kommun*) about its plans to construct wind turbines near Strängnäs, and applied for a building permit for the turbines.⁴

11. Since the plans concerned two wind turbines, each with a height of 140 meters, no permit under the Environmental Code was needed (see para. 27). Instead the applicant notified the regulatory authority, i.e., the Environment Committee in the Municipality of Strängnäs (the municipal committee responsible for the municipality's tasks within the area of environmental and health protection), and applied for a building permit under the Planning and Building Act (1987:19).⁵

12. The wind turbines were to be located on the properties Näs 1:4 and Knutsberg 1:2. The distance between the intended locations of the wind turbines and the nearest residential property was at least 680 metres.⁶

13. On 22 February 2008, the Environment Committee decided, in accordance with the Environmental Code, on measures to be undertaken by the applicant including the location and height of the turbines and the noise, shadows and reflections from the turbines or rotor blades.

14. On 31 March 2009, a notification regarding the application for the building permit under the Planning and Building Act was sent to known affected parties, namely individuals who owned land near the intended installations. They were given three weeks to comment on the application.

15. On 3 April 2009, the application for the building permit was announced in the local newspaper and concerned parties were given the opportunity to comment on the application within three weeks.⁷

16. On 3 November 2010, the Planning and Building Committee of the Municipality of Strängnäs (*Plan- och byggnämnden i Strängnäs kommun*) issued a building permit for two wind turbines with a height of 140 meters each.⁸

17. On 14 January 2011, the communicant and other individuals living in the areas surrounding the location of the planned wind turbines and two environmental organizations appealed the building permit to the County Administrative Board of Södermanland (*Länsstyrelsen i Södermanlands län*).⁹ Their appeal stated, among other things, that wind turbines were dangerous machines that must comply with Directive 2006/42/EC of the

³ This section summarizes only the main facts, evidence and issues considered to be relevant to the question of compliance, as presented to and considered by the Committee.

⁴ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 3 (first para.); and communication, p. 3.

⁵ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 5.

⁶ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 3 (first para.), see also letter from the communicant dated 28 June 2014, p. 1.

⁷ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 3.

⁸ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 3. Communication, p. 3 (as to the date).

⁹ Letter from the communicant dated 18 September 2014, p. 4.

European Parliament and the Council of 17 May 2006 on machinery (Machinery Directive), and the construction of the two wind turbines would expose the communicant and other local residents to a risk of life-threatening injuries.¹⁰

18. In three separate decisions (15 December 2011, 4 January and 23 March 2012),¹¹ the County Administrative Board of Södermanland found the appeals by the communicant and about 30 other appellants inadmissible because they were not considered to be affected by the intended activities in such a way that they had a right to appeal the decision of the Committee under section 22 of the Administrative Procedure Act; their properties were situated too far away from the intended location of the closest wind turbine. The County Administrative Board found 10 appeals admissible, but not well founded, and the appeals were refused.¹²

19. The communicant and other appellants (both those whose appeals were found inadmissible and those whose appeals were found admissible but were unsuccessful on the merits of the case) appealed to the the Land and Environmental Court at the Nacka District Court (*Nacka tingsrätt, mark- och miljödomstolen*).¹³

20. On 15 May 2013, the Nacka District Court rejected the appeal by the communicant (case P129-12).¹⁴

21. The communicant appealed the Nacka District Court decision to the Land and Environment Court of Appeal (*Mark- och miljööverdomstolen*), but was not given leave to appeal. The decision of 21 August 2014 by the Land and Environment Court of Appeal cannot be appealed.¹⁵

22. On 15 May 2014, the Nacka District Court revoked the local authority's decision to issue a building permit for the two wind turbines because no inventory of birds had been carried out (cases P635-12 and P1924-12). The Court's decision was appealed to the Land and Environment Court of Appeal by the communicant and others. The communicant was not given standing in the appeal, but, among others, an owner of property within Helgaro-Väla 1:1 (Johan Andersson) was. The communicant remained involved in the case as the representative of Mr. Andersson.¹⁶

23. On 9 March 2015, the Land and Environment Court of Appeal delivered its judgment in cases P5593-14 and P5594-14. In an overall consideration of what had emerged in the case, the Court made the assessment that the investigation in the case did not provide sufficient support for the conclusion that the siting of the turbines on the site in question met the requirements for an adaptation to the natural values in the area. The appeals were therefore refused and no building permit was granted.

¹⁰ Comments from the Party concerned of 10 December 2014, p. 3.

¹¹ Annexes 1–3 of the additional information from the communicant dated 7 September 2015.

¹² Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 3 (second to last paragraph).

¹³ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 4.

¹⁴ Comments from the Party concerned dated 10 December 2014, p. 3.

¹⁵ Decision 2014-08.21, case 5592-14. See comments from the Party concerned dated 10 December 2014, pp. 3–4, and letter from the communicant 18 September 2014, p. 2.

¹⁶ Comments from the Party concerned dated 10 December 2014, p. 4; letter from the communicant dated 18 September 2014, p. 4.

B. Legal framework¹⁷

Access to information

24. In Sweden, the right of access to environmental information is provided for under the general principle of public access to official documents, prescribed in chapter 2 of the Freedom of the Press Act.¹⁸ The procedure for the management of official documents and provisions concerning secrecy are specified in the Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act. A public authority's decision to refuse access to official documents must be communicated in writing to the person that made the request. The decision must state the reasons for refusal and provide information about the applicant's access to appeal, including when and how such an appeal should be made (Administrative Procedure Act, sects. 20–21).

25. A person whose request to obtain a document has been rejected, or whose request for access to an official document has been granted subject to reservations, is normally entitled under the Freedom of the Press Act to request that the matter be reviewed by a court. The Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act contains provisions concerning when reservations may be imposed and the court to which appeals should be addressed. If the requester wishes to go to court, he or she is generally entitled to appeal against the decision (Freedom of the Press Act, chap. 2, art. 15, and Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act, chap. 6, sect. 7). Appeals are generally made to an Administrative Court of Appeal. A decision of an Administrative Court of Appeal may be appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, though the Supreme Administrative Court must first grant a leave of appeal, which is mainly done in cases of precedential interest. If the request is made to a Land and Environment Court, an appeal is handled by the Land and Environment Court of Appeal and then by the Supreme Court (Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act, chap. 6, sects. 8–9). The appeal must be made within three weeks from the day when the appellant was notified of the decision (Administrative Procedure Act, sect. 23, and Administrative Court Procedure Act, sect. 6a) and, if the appeal concerns a decision by a Land and Environment Court, within three weeks from the date of the decision (Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act, chap. 6, sect. 10, and Code of Judicial Procedure, chap. 52, sect. 1). The appeal is delivered to the decision-making authority, which then sends the appeal to the court. Before sending over the appeal, the authority has the opportunity, if the appeal concerns a decision that the authority has made as first instance, to review its decision. If the decision is manifestly wrong, it has a duty to correct it, provided that this can be done rapidly and simply without detriment to a private party (Administrative Procedure Act, sect. 27). On appeal, the court steps into the role of the decision maker, and decides whether or not to give the appellant access to the relevant information.

26. If the requester is refused access to information or considers that the required procedure has not been followed, he or she can also complain to the Parliamentary Ombudsman (Justitieombudsmannen). The Ombudsman may criticize the authority, and also, rarely, bring charges for misuse of office according to chapter 20, section 1, of the Penal Code. Criticism by the Ombudsman carries considerable authority, though it is not binding and the Ombudsman cannot require an authority to release information in an individual case.

¹⁷ The legal provisions referred to are the provisions that it is necessary to consider for the purposes of these findings. As the application concerning the building permit for the wind turbines in Strängnäs was made before 2 May 2011, the older wording of the Planning and Building Act, that is the wording of the Planning and Building Act (1987:10), was applied in the Swedish courts.

¹⁸ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 8.

Permitting process for wind turbines

27. The building of wind turbines and the establishment of wind farms are activities regulated under the Swedish Environmental Code and the Planning and Building Act. A building permit is not mandatory if the wind farm or turbine requires a permit under chapter 9 of the Environmental Code (so as to avoid overlapping processes). Under the Swedish Environmental Code, a wind farm with more than six wind turbines, or two or more wind turbines with a height that exceeds 150 metres, requires a permit. If an application does not exceed six wind turbines or, alternatively, two wind turbines with a height that exceeds 150 metres, a permit can be replaced by a notification to the regulatory authority under chapter 9 of the Environmental Code. If an application is dealt with by a notification to the regulatory authority the applicant will also need to apply for a building permit.¹⁹

Access to justice regarding building permits under the Planning and Building Act

28. At the time the application was made, building permits under the Planning and Building Act and decisions relating to violations of the Planning and Building Act were subject to administrative appeal to a County Administrative Board. The decision by the County Administrative Board could then be appealed to a Land and Environment Court (Planning and Building Act 2010:900, chap. 13, sects. 3 and 6). The court would decide the case on the merits and decide whether or not to change the decision. An appeal could be made by concerned parties. Section 22 of the Administrative Procedure Act provides: “A person whom the decision concerns may appeal against it, provided that the decision affects him adversely and is subject to appeal.”

29. Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) meeting the requirements specified in the Environmental Code have standing in appeal cases concerning detailed plans entailing revoking shore protection, or if the plan can be assumed to result in a significant environmental impact owing to the fact that the planned area may be used for activities or measures requiring environmental impact assessment (Planning and Building Act 2010:900, chap. 13, sect. 12). Hence, according to chapter 16, section 13, of the Environmental Code these decisions under the Planning and Building Act can be appealed by non-profit associations whose purpose is to promote nature conservation or environmental protection, provided the organization has been active for at least three years in Sweden and has at least 100 members or else can show that it has “support from the public”. Environmental NGOs can appeal building decisions under the conditions of section 22 of the Administrative Procedure Act, just like individuals, but they do not have the same standing rights for building rights as they have for planning decisions.

C. Substantive issues

30. Among other things, the communicant states that development of wind power in the Party concerned has caused, and continues to cause, damage to the environment and to human health. In addition, building of wind turbines generates very large emissions of carbon dioxide, which “can never be made good by electricity from wind turbines replacing electricity from coal plants that do not exist in Sweden”.²⁰

¹⁹ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 5.

²⁰ Communication, pp. 5–6.

Access to information — articles 4 and 5

Article 4

31. With respect to article 4 of the Convention, the communicant alleges that the Strängnäs Municipality and the County Administrative Board of Södermanland have refused to respond to his and his network's questions about the safety of wind turbines and the safety measures required under the Machinery Directive.²¹ He alleges that they have never received any explanation as to why their information requests have been denied.²²

32. The communicant also alleges that he requested documents necessary for an appeal against the permit for wind turbines, but the authorities refused access to the necessary documents. He made a complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman and received 740 pages of documentation.²³ He alleges, however, that these were not the documents about market surveillance under the Machinery Directive he had requested, but, rather, documents of inspection notices under the Work Environment Act (*Arbetsmiljölagen* (1977:1160)) and had nothing to do with Machinery Directive.²⁴ The communicant submits that even the Ombudsman was unable to obtain answers from the Swedish Work Environment Authority regarding the communicant's questions to that agency on the safety of wind turbines or requirements on action taken in accordance with the Machinery Directive. The requested information included, inter alia, questions regarding warning signs as required under the Machinery Directive and documentation demonstrating that market surveillance in accordance with the Machinery Directive had been carried out.²⁵

33. The Party concerned argues that nothing in the communication shows that the communicant has been denied access to documents held by the municipality concerning the application of the building permit for the two wind turbines in question.²⁶

Article 5

34. The communicant alleges multiple breaches of article 5. He alleges a general breach of article 5 because no information about the dangers of the wind turbines has been given to the public.²⁷ He also alleges failure to comply with a number of the specific requirements of article 5, including those set out in paragraphs 1 (a)–(c), 2, 2 (b) (ii), 3, 3(a)–(b), 4, 5 and 7 (a)–(c) of that article.²⁸

35. The Party concerned observes that, on 31 March 2009, the municipality of Strängnäs sent information to concerned parties regarding the application for a building permit for the construction of the two wind turbines in Strängnäs. While the communicant was not considered to be a concerned party by the municipality and was not therefore sent the information personally, the same information was also published in the local newspaper, the Journal of Strängnäs (*Strängnäs tidning*) on 3 April 2009. The Party concerned

²¹ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, pp. 4, 5, 24.

²² Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 5.

²³ Communication, p. 3. Similarly, in the letter from the communicant dated 8 December 2014 (received 10 December 2014), p. 1.

²⁴ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 24.

²⁵ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 25.

²⁶ Opening statement of the Party concerned at the hearing held at the Committee's forty-eighth meeting.

²⁷ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions pp. 5–7 and 28.

²⁸ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, pp. 5–7.

considers that it has correctly implemented the requirements of article 5, paragraph 2, of the Convention in its national law.²⁹

Public participation in decision-making — articles 6, 7 and 8

Article 6, paragraphs 2, 3, 6 and 7

36. The communicant alleges the Party concerned has failed to comply with article 6 of the Convention both in respect of the wind turbines near Strängnäs and wind turbines generally in Sweden.³⁰ The communicant alleges that the public concerned has been denied information about how the safety requirements of the Machinery Directive apply to wind turbines.³¹ He alleges that as a result of this denial, the Party concerned is in breach of article 6, paragraph 2, of the Convention regarding notification of the public concerned. He also submits that being denied this information has meant that the public concerned cannot prepare and participate effectively, and this is a breach of article 6, paragraph 3, of the Convention. Furthermore, being denied this information is in breach of article 6, paragraph 6, of the Convention as the public concerned is entitled to have access to all information relevant to the decision-making.

37. As a separate allegation under article 6, paragraph 2, of the Convention, the communicant alleges that in several cases the only information provided on the permit process for a wind turbine was a simple advertisement in a local newspaper. He asserts that this is a clear violation of legal procedure and deprives the public concerned of their rights under the Convention.³²

38. With respect to article 6, paragraph 7, of the Convention, the communicant alleges that, on direct orders from the Government, the Machinery Directive is not applied in decision-making procedures for permits for wind turbines in Sweden.³³ Similarly, during public consultations on wind turbines in Sweden, the authorities will not answer questions from the public about safety under the Machinery Directive, and this is in breach of article 6, paragraph 7, of the Convention.³⁴

39. The Party concerned contends that a permit for construction of two wind turbines of the kind at issue in this case is not an activity that falls under annex I to the Convention, nor is it a type of a project that the Swedish legislature has decided may have a significant effect on the environment. The Party concerned therefore fails to see that the requirements of article 6 of the Convention are relevant in respect of the building permit procedure regarding these two turbines.

Article 7

40. With regard to article 7 of the Convention, the communicant alleges that there has been a breach in the case of the wind turbines near Strängnäs and in general.³⁵ The communicant alleges that on no occasion were the public invited to participate in the preparation of plans, programmes and policies relating to the expansion of wind turbines on

²⁹ Opening statement of the Party concerned at the hearing held at the Committee's forty-eighth meeting.

³⁰ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 8.

³¹ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 8.

³² Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 23.

³³ Communication, p. 4, communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 11.

³⁴ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, pp. 9–20.

³⁵ Communication, p. 2 (first to seventh paragraphs).

Helgarö. He alleges that, on the contrary, the municipality had tried to conceal its plans concerning building permits for wind turbines on Helgarö.³⁶

41. The Party concerned rejects this allegation.³⁷

Article 8

42. The communicant alleges that the public concerned has not been able to participate during the preparation of executive regulations and/or generally applicable legally binding normative instruments concerning permits for wind turbines.³⁸ The communication alleges that media reports in 2012 reported that the Government intended to speed up the process for the issue of wind turbines by amending the Environmental Code. The communicant states that his network wrote to the Government requesting to participate in the preparation of this legislation.³⁹ According to the communicant, no response was received from the Government.⁴⁰

43. The Party concerned rejects this allegation.

Access to justice — article 9

44. With regard to article 9 of the Convention, the communicant submits that there are breaches both in the case of the wind turbines near Strängnäs and under the law of the Party concerned in general.⁴¹ The communicant submits that the courts of the Party concerned rarely or never mention the Aarhus Convention on issues related to wind turbines.⁴² He claims that, from 2008 to date, during hundreds of lawsuits regarding permission for wind turbines, the Convention was mentioned by the judicial system only once.⁴³

45. The Party concerned contests all the allegations made by the communicant concerning article 9 of the Convention.

Denial of access to challenge contravention of national law regarding the environment (Machinery Directive)

46. The communicant claims that the County Administrative Boards reject all references to the European Union Machinery Directive. The communicant further contends that, by government decree, the Machinery Directive may not be included in a judicial review of permits for wind turbines.⁴⁴ In support of his allegation, he refers to two documents from the Swedish Government that he claims state that “In this trial [the] Machinery Directive is not to be taken into account.”⁴⁵ By order of 9 March 2012 from the Swedish Government

³⁶ Communication, p. 5.

³⁷ Response of the Party concerned to communication, p. 6.

³⁸ Communication, p. 2.

³⁹ Letter to Minister of 18 November 2012 (in Swedish) available from <http://www.helgaro-liv.se/FN 2013/18-11-2012 till minister Ek.doc> (last accessed on 15 December 2016).

⁴⁰ Communication, p. 5.

⁴¹ Communication, p. 2.

⁴² Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 23.

⁴³ I.e., in case HD 2012-12-18 O 4925-11. (See communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 33.)

⁴⁴ Communication, p. 7, and communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Documents available (in Swedish) from <http://www.helgaro-liv.se/FN 2013/9-3-2012 reg arbdep.pdf> and <http://www.helgaro-liv.se/FN 2013/17-3-2011 regering.pdf> (both last accessed on 15 December 2016). See communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 28 (see also pps. 30–31).

only the Environment Code (*Miljöbalken 1998:808*) and the Planning and Building Act (*Plan- och bygglagen 2010:900*) can be considered in the judicial review of permits for wind turbines. The communicant alleges that Swedish courts comply with that order and no judgment exists concerning the application of the Machinery Directive.⁴⁶ He submits that the Government's order prevents the public from exercising its right to challenge the substantive and procedural legality of decisions, acts or omissions subject to article 6 of the Convention.⁴⁷

47. The communicant submits that the Government's order of 9 March 2012 prevents the proper implementation of access to justice, as courts cannot take into account the Government's failure to implement the design and safety regulations and market surveillance requirements of the Machinery Directive.⁴⁸ He contends that a court should not be entitled to exempt certain laws that do not fit the court's views on the merits, or that the Government has ordered to be excluded.⁴⁹

48. The Party concerned states that the courts in Sweden have an independent status within the Swedish constitution. Neither the Government nor any other authority may decide how a court should adjudicate in a particular case.⁵⁰

Denial of standing

49. The communicant alleges several problems with the law of the Party concerned on standing:

50. First, the communicant alleges the rules for locus standi in the Party concerned are so vague that they can be interpreted arbitrarily by the courts.⁵¹

51. Second, he alleges that, even though the legal requirement for associations to have 2,000 members in order to have standing has been reduced to 100 members, this still deprives most associations concerned with wind turbines of locus standi in Sweden, as in Sweden wind turbines are located in sparsely populated rural areas where it is almost impossible to create an association of 100 members.⁵² In support of his allegations, the communicant cites the decision by the Supreme Court in the case of *Taggen Vindpark*.⁵³

52. Third, with respect to his own standing to challenge the wind turbines in Helgarö-Strängnäs, the communicant claims that his property, located at Väla gård Helgarö, 64592 Strängnäs, is situated next to the land on which the wind turbines were to be built,⁵⁴ yet he was denied standing.

53. With respect to the communicant's standing to appeal the permit for the wind turbines, the Party concerned submits that the address of the communicant is Väla 3, 64592

⁴⁶ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Communication, pp. 4 and 6, and communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, pp. 11, 32 and 33.

⁴⁹ Communicant's e-mail of 8 March 2014 (mislabelled as 8 March 2013).

⁵⁰ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 4.

⁵¹ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 30.

⁵² Communication, p. 10.

⁵³ Communication, p. 9, see also communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, pp. 22–23. In this case, published as *Nytt juridiskt arkiv* 2012, p. 921, the Supreme Court refused leave to appeal because the organization only comprised some 10 members, had been active less than three years and had not been able to show that the organization as such had the support of the public.

⁵⁴ Communication, p. 1.

Strängnäs, which corresponds to the real estate property Helgarö-Väla 1:2.⁵⁵ The Party concerned asserts that all of the real estate properties named Helgarö-Väla (except Helgarö-Väla 1:1) are located between 1.5 and 3 kilometres (km) from the location of the closest proposed wind turbine, and therefore the Party believes that the communicant does not live closer than 1.5 kilometres from the location of the closest turbine.⁵⁶ The Party concerned submits that the fact that the courts did not hold the communicant to be a concerned party and therefore denied him legal standing in the case concerning the permitting process for the issuance of building permits for the two wind turbines in question cannot be considered a breach of the Convention.⁵⁷

54. The Party concerned states that a construction permit or a detail plan for wind mills can be appealed by an individual if that individual is considered to be a concerned party. Concerned parties according to Swedish law are those who have a direct concern of private interest.⁵⁸ The Party concerned asserts that the Supreme Court and the Environmental Court of Appeal have applied a generous attitude regarding who may be considered to be concerned⁵⁹ and cites a 1997 decision of the Supreme Administrative Court in this regard:

in principle, every person who may be harmed or exposed to other kinds of inconvenience by environmentally harmful activity in a permit decision is considered a party in interest. However, a mere theoretical or completely insignificant risk of damage or detriment is not sufficient. (RÅ 1997 ref. 38).⁶⁰

55. The Party concerned says that owning land near planned wind turbines or other installations or activities that might be harmful to the environment qualifies an individual as a party concerned. However, an individual does not have to own nearby land to qualify as a party concerned.⁶¹ The Party concerned cites case law that individuals living within sight and at a distance of 550 metres from the location of planned wind turbines have been considered parties of concern (RÅ 1992 ref. 81). Likewise, an individual living approximately 800 metres from the location of a proposed wind turbine was considered as a party concerned by the court and was therefore allowed to appeal the building permit approving the turbine (case P 1574-13, 3 June 2003).⁶²

56. The Party concerned states that once it is established that an applicant is allowed to appeal, the scope of review is complete, meaning that the individual can invoke all kinds of interests. No arguments are precluded, thus the appellant can plead any private or public interest in the case.⁶³

57. With respect to standing of associations, the Party concerned states that NGOs other than those with 100 members or more can also be granted standing, provided they can show that they have the “support from the public”. Moreover, in 2012 a proposal to remove the criteria on nationality and length of time in activity (though not the number of members) was circulated for referral by the Ministry of Environment. It was well received, and internal discussion on how to proceed with the proposal is ongoing.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Comments from the Party concerned dated 10 December 2014, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Comments from the Party concerned dated 10 December 2014, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Comments from the Party concerned dated 10 December 2014, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, pp. 5–6.

⁶⁰ Reiterated in comments from the Party concerned 10 December 2014, p. 4.

⁶¹ Comments from the Party concerned 10 December 2014, p. 4.

⁶² Comments from the Party concerned 10 December 2014, pp. 4–5.

⁶³ Comments from the Party concerned 10 December 2014, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Response of the Party concerned to the communication dated 26 September 2013, pp. 13–14.

Lack of impartiality — the County Administrative Board

58. The communicant submits that the foundation of a democracy is that political power is separated from the judicial power. He submits, however, that this principle is infringed in matters of wind turbines in Sweden by the fact that the first instance in an appeal regarding a wind turbine is the County Administrative Board. He submits that the Board is not a court, but the organization through which political power, through Government directives, is exerted. When officers of the County Administrative Board, who have to obey government directives, deliver decisions, these are the foundations for the entire subsequent legal proceedings. This disregards the right of citizens to independent and impartial justice in matters relating to their environment.⁶⁵

59. The Party concerned rejects the communicant's allegation. It contends that County Administrative Boards handle and decide administrative cases quite independently from the Government and central agencies (Instrument of Government, chap. 12, sect. 2). A ministry or a superior authority cannot intervene in an individual administrative procedure. Due administrative procedure means, among other things, that the authority has to communicate the developments of the case with concerned parties (Administrative Procedure Act, sect. 17), to provide a reasoned decision (ibid., sect. 20), and access to the materials (ibid., section 16).

Access to effective remedies — the Parliamentary Ombudsman

60. The communicant alleges that the Parliamentary Ombudsmen cannot give access to effective remedies as required under article 9 of the Convention. The communicant also alleges that the Ombudsman has not investigated his network's complaints of bias by officials⁶⁶ nor helped to get the information he had requested on how the safety regulations in the Machinery Directive should be applied.⁶⁷

61. The Party concerned submits that inadequate or improper administrative procedure may be brought to the attention of the Parliamentary Ombudsman, who may criticize the authority, and also bring charges for misuse of office according to chapter 20, section 1, of the Penal Code. Generally, the Ombudsman's decision will stay at criticism. Such criticism carries much authority. However, it does not provide any remedy for the individual. The Ombudsman cannot make the authority provide access to the information in the relevant individual case.⁶⁸ Similarly, the ombudsmen have disciplinary functions, and act through opinions. They have the competence to prosecute civil servants for misuse of office. They cannot, however, intervene in an individual case, and only scrutinize the administrative handling of the case.⁶⁹

D. Domestic remedies and admissibility

62. The communicant's recourse to domestic remedies regarding his requests for access to information is summarized in paragraph 32 above.

63. The communicant's recourse to domestic remedies with respect to the building permit for the Helgarö/Strängnäs wind turbines is summarized in paragraphs 17–23 above.

⁶⁵ Communication, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 24.

⁶⁷ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions, p. 25 (full stops added).

⁶⁸ Response of the Party concerned to communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Response of the Party concerned to communication dated 26 September 2013, p. 13.

64. The substance of the Land and Environment Court of Appeal's judgment of 9 March 2015 was broadly favourable to the communicant: the court found that the building permit, to which the communicant was opposed, should not be granted. But the communicant alleges that there were a number of acts by the Swedish authorities that demonstrated a breach of provisions of the Convention by the Party concerned.

65. The Party concerned contests the admissibility of the communication on the ground that the communicant's court proceedings were still ongoing at the time of his submission of the communication and thus there were still domestic remedies available in accordance with paragraph 21 of the annex to decision 1/7.

III. Consideration and evaluation by the Committee

66. Sweden ratified the Convention on 20 May 2005. The Convention entered into force for Sweden on 18 August 2005, being 90 days after the deposit of Sweden's instrument of ratification.

Admissibility

67. The Committee notes that, as described in paragraphs 17–23 above, the communication was submitted before domestic remedies were exhausted. While stressing that domestic remedies should, in general, always be exhausted before the submission of a communication, given that domestic remedies were exhausted before the Committee finalized its findings in this case, the Committee finds the communication is admissible, except for the claim regarding article 4 of the Convention, which the Committee finds inadmissible for the reasons given in paragraphs 71–73 below.

68. The Committee will not consider the European Union secondary legislation relating to machinery because it has received no evidence that such legislation is relevant to any alleged breach of the Convention by the Party concerned. Nor will the Committee consider the Swedish Courts' decisions except insofar as those decisions relate to alleged breaches of the Convention.

The identity of the communicant

69. As a preliminary point, since the original communication was submitted in the name of Bernd Stümer only, the Committee considers Mr. Stümer to be the sole communicant in this case, while the organization Formningen Landskapsskydd i Strängnäs (FLIS), which supports Mr. Stümer, has acted as an observer.

70. With respect to the communicant's subsequent assertion that FLIS should also be considered a communicant,⁷⁰ the Committee emphasizes that the following findings would not have differed in any way had FLIS been a communicant.

Article 4

71. The communicant made a number of requests for information to the Municipality of Strängnäs. The Parliamentary Ombudsman's decision of 11 March 2009 held that there had been a number of failures by the municipality to process those requests in accordance with the law. With respect to the communicant's request for information filed on 17 November 2008, the Ombudsman's decision assumes that was subsequently correctly dealt with; the Committee has been given no evidence that contradicts the Ombudsman's assumption.

⁷⁰ Communicant's reply dated 24 September 2013 to the Committee's questions.

72. To the extent, therefore, that the communicant considers that the Parliamentary Ombudsman, in its decision of 11 March 2009, upheld his concerns regarding the authorities' inadequate response to his requests for access to information, the Committee finds the Ombudsman's decision criticizing the authorities' various failures has already addressed the communicant's concerns at the domestic level.

73. However, to the extent that the communicant considers that any of his complaints regarding access to information under article 4 were not, or were not adequately, addressed by the Ombudsman, the communicant should have exercised his rights to go to court with respect to those information requests. As he did not do so, the Committee finds that his remaining allegations under article 4 are inadmissible in accordance with paragraph 21 of the annex to decision I/7 for failure to exhaust available domestic remedies.

Article 5

74. The communicant alleges that specific categories of information should have been disseminated by the Party concerned under article 5 of the Convention, and in particular in accordance with paragraphs 1 (a)–(c), 2, 2 (b) (ii), 3, 3 (a)–(b), 4, 5 and 7 (a)–(c) of that article. The Committee has on a number of occasions⁷¹ stressed that article 5, paragraph 1 (a), of the Convention requires each Party to ensure that “public authorities possess and update environmental information which is relevant to their functions”. However, with respect to the communicant's allegations under the provisions of article 5 in the current case, the Committee finds that, while the communicant made many allegations of non-compliance with that article, he has not substantiated any allegation with sufficiently detailed, clear and specific arguments that would convince the Committee that those provisions of article 5 of the Convention have indeed been breached in this case. The Committee thus finds the allegations under article 5 unsubstantiated.

Article 6

75. The communicant alleges a number of breaches of article 6. The Committee, however, has received no evidence that establishes that the Party concerned was obliged to apply article 6 to the decisions on the wind turbines in question. In particular, the Committee has been provided with no legal basis to find that the decisions to permit the wind turbines falls within the scope of either paragraph 1 (a) or 1 (b) of article 6.

76. As far as paragraph 1 (a) of article 6 is concerned, the Committee notes that wind turbines are not expressly mentioned in annex I to the Convention. It follows that the only way in which the wind turbines in this case would fall within paragraph 1 (a) would be if the construction of the turbines were an activity referred to in paragraph 20 of annex I to the Convention, i.e., if it were an activity where public participation is provided for under an environmental impact assessment procedure in accordance with national legislation; but the communicant has not sought to argue, or present any evidence, that paragraph 20 of annex I applies.

77. What is more, there is no evidence before the Committee to suggest that it has been determined by the Party concerned that the construction of the wind turbines in question is an activity that may have a significant effect on the environment as provided for by article 6, paragraph 1 (b).

⁷¹ See, for example, the findings and recommendations with regard to communication ACCC/C/2012/68 concerning compliance by the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2014/5), para. 88. See also the findings and recommendations with regard to communication ACCC/C/2010/54 concerning compliance by the European Union (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2012/12), para. 90.

78. The Committee therefore finds that article 6 did not apply to the decision-making on the building permits for the two wind turbines, and thus there was no breach of the provisions of article 6 in this case.

Articles 7 and 8

79. The communicant alleges general breaches of article 7, but has not provided the Committee with any evidence regarding the preparation of any specific plan, programme or policy that would engage that article. The Committee thus finds his allegations regarding article 7 to be unsubstantiated.

80. The communicant also alleges general breaches of article 8, but has likewise not put before the Committee evidence of the preparation of any executive regulations and/or generally applicable legally binding normative instruments to which that article would apply. In this regard, the Committee notes the communicant's refers briefly to media reports in 2012 regarding a possible amendment to the Environmental Code, but since the communicant did not elaborate on this further, the Committee understands that an amendment process did not, in fact, take place. The Committee thus finds the allegations regarding article 8 to be unsubstantiated also.

Article 9, paragraph 2

81. Article 9, paragraph 2, of the Convention requires Parties to ensure members of the public concerned have access to a review procedure before a court of law and/or another independent and impartial body established by law, to challenge the substantive and procedural legality of any decision, act or omission subject to the provisions of article 6 and, where so provided for under national law, of other relevant provisions of the Convention.

82. Since the Committee has found that the wind turbines in question are not subject to the provisions of article 6, and there is no evidence that the law of the Party concerned provides for article 9, paragraph 2, to apply to other provisions of the Convention, the Committee also finds that there is no breach of article 9, paragraph 2, in this case.

Article 9, paragraph 3

83. Article 9, paragraph 3, of the Convention provides that each Party shall ensure that, where they meet the criteria, if any, laid down in its national law, members of the public have access to administrative or judicial procedures to challenge acts and omissions by private persons and public authorities which contravene provisions of its national law relating to the environment.

84. The Committee has previously found that the Convention is intended to allow a great deal of flexibility in defining which environmental organizations have access to justice. Parties are not obliged to establish a system of popular action in their national laws so that anyone can challenge any decision, act or omission relating to the environment; but, on the other hand, Parties may not use the flexibility provided for in article 9, paragraph 3, as an excuse for introducing or maintaining criteria so strict that they effectively bar all or almost all environmental organizations or other members of the public from challenging acts or omissions that contravene national law relating to the environment.⁷²

⁷² See the Compliance Committee's findings and recommendations with regard to communication ACCC/C/2005/11 concerning Belgium (ECE/MP.PP/C.1/2006/4/Add.2), para. 35, and its report on compliance by Denmark with its obligations under the Convention (ECE/MP.PP/2008/5/Add.4), para. 29.

85. The Committee has not been given any evidence that suggests that the criteria laid down in the national law with respect to environmental associations are outside the margin of discretion allowed to Parties when implementing article 9, paragraph 3. In this regard, the Committee notes that associations with less than 100 members are entitled to standing so long as they can show they have the “support from the public” and have been active at least three years (see para. 29 above).

86. As for the criteria for individuals, the applicable legislation, section 22 of the Administrative Procedure Act, provides: “A person whom the decision concerns may appeal against it, provided that the decision affects him adversely and is subject to appeal.”

87. Under the jurisprudence of the Supreme Administrative Court, “in principle, every individual who may be harmed, or exposed to other kinds of inconvenience by an environmentally harmful activity allowed by a permit decision is considered as a concerned party. However, a mere theoretical or completely insignificant risk of damage or detriment is not sufficient.”⁷³ With respect to building permits, the Supreme Administrative Court has ruled that “such decisions are deemed to concern — in addition to the applicant — owners of the properties bordering directly on the property that the building permit applies to and, in addition owners of properties in close neighbourhood that are particularly affected on account of the nature and scope of the measure covered by the building permit, natural conditions at site, etc.”⁷⁴

88. The Committee considers that there is nothing to suggest that the criteria described for standing to appeal building permits, as set out in legislation and developed in jurisprudence, violate article 9, paragraph 3, of the Convention.

89. The next question for the Committee is to consider whether the reviewing bodies in the present case applied the established criteria for standing in a way that ran beyond the scope permitted by article 9, paragraph 3, of the Convention.

90. In its decision of 15 December 2011, the County Administrative Board of Södermanland made a decision on the appeal of the decision of the Planning and Building Committee of the Municipality of Strängnäs on a building permit for two wind turbines — Näs 1:4 and Knutsberg 1:2. The Board said:

Under case law building permit decisions are considered to concern owners of the properties bordering directly on the property that the building permit applies to and, as previously mentioned, also owners of properties in a close neighbourhood that are particularly affected on account of the nature and scope of the measure that the building permit refers to, natural conditions at the site, etc. None of the properties with the designation Björsund, Helgarö, Helgarö-Väla (with the exception of Helgarö-Väla 1:1), Helgarö-Åsby, Rällinge or Stenstavig is a neighbour sharing a border with either Knutsberg 1:2 or Näs 1:4, and they are, in addition, located between 1.5 and more than 3 km from the closest wind turbine. Nor do Knutsberg 1:16 (with a distance of about 1 km from the closest wind turbine) or Knutsberg 1:6, 1:13 or 1:14 meet this requirement. The latter three properties are located between 1.2 and 1.3 km from Näs 1:4. In view of this, the owners of/residents on these properties cannot be considered to be affected by the intended activities in such a way that they have a right to appeal the decision of the

⁷³ See paragraph 54 above.

⁷⁴ RÅ 1992 report 81, cited in Nacka Land and Environment Court, judgement of 15 May 2014, case P129-12.

Committee under section 22 of the Administrative Procedure Act. Their appeals shall therefore be rejected.⁷⁵

91. The communicant lives on the property Helgarö-Väla 1:2, so he is one of the persons whose appeal was dismissed in this case.

92. In its judgment of 15 May 2014 in case P129-12, the Nacka District Court considered, among other things, the communicant's appeal against the decision of the County and Administrative Board. With respect to the communicant's appeal, the court found as follows:

Regarding Bernd Stümer, the court notes that his property is not a property bordering on any of the properties on which the wind turbines are to be erected. Nor has it emerged that Bernd Stümer's property is located in a close neighbourhood that is particularly affected in view of the nature and scope of the measure covered by the building permit, the natural conditions at the site etc. The references that Bernd Stümer has made to the [European Court of Human Rights] and a ruling of the [Court of Justice of the European Union] do not alter the assessment of the Court in this part of the case. In line with the deliberations that the Court has made above, public interests cannot be cited to support standing. The Court therefore shares the assessment of the County Administrative Board that Bernd Stümer cannot be considered to have a right to appeal the decision. Bernd Stümer's appeal shall therefore be refused.⁷⁶

93. In its decision of 21 August 2014, the Land and Environment Court of Appeal concluded that there was no reason to grant leave to appeal against the decision of the Nacka District Court with respect to the communicant's standing, hence the judgment by the Nacka District Court remained in force.

94. In the Committee's view, those two passages indicate that distance was the principal consideration when finding that the communicant did not have standing. The Committee notes that the Party concerned has argued that distance was not the only factor taken into account by the County Administrative Board when it determined who had standing, and that the Board referred to the case law at large (which requires an assessment of all the circumstances of the individual case) and made its decision on the basis of that case law.

95. The Committee considers that the view taken by the Party concerned is not that clear from the County Administrative Board's decision. Indeed, it might be inferred that the Board excluded Mr. Stümer from having a right to appeal against the decision to grant the building permits because, first, his property did not share a border with the land on which the wind turbines were being built and, second, because his property was too far away to be located in a close neighbourhood that would be particularly affected by the wind turbine. It is not immediately apparent that the Board, in reaching the second conclusion, took into account all the relevant circumstances; the text of the decision might be taken to imply that the Board took into account only Mr. Stümer's property's distance from the wind turbines.

96. In this regard, while not an allegation raised in this case, it is clear to the Committee that the requirement in article 9, paragraph 4, for review procedures to be "fair" should be read as a requirement to ensure that claimants are able to know the reasons for the decision of the review body, inter alia, to enable the claimants to challenge that decision where they so choose.

⁷⁵ Annex 2 to the e-mail from the Party concerned dated 5 October 2015, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Annex 1 to the e-mail from the Party concerned dated 5 October 2015, p. 11.

97. Returning to the present case, the Committee is concerned that there is little evidence in the respective decisions of the Swedish courts to show how, if at all, any factor other than distance was taken into account when considering whether Mr. Stümer should have had standing to appeal against the decision to grant the building permits.

98. Despite the discretion given to Parties in article 9, paragraph 3, to lay down criteria for standing in their national law, if reviewing bodies, when considering whether the criteria were met in practice failed to take into account all considerations relevant to those criteria, that Party would be in non-compliance with article 9, paragraph 3. Clearly every wind turbine will be different, and have a potentially different impact. While it is impossible to write a conclusive list of the possible impacts of wind turbines, the Committee considers that, depending on the circumstances, it may be necessary to take into account some of the following considerations when assessing the potential impact of wind turbines:

(a) A wind turbine may have an impact on an individual because of noise and vibration or shadow flicker, and due regard should be given to safety considerations, such as proximity to roads and railways, air traffic safety, proximity to power lines and the possibility of interference with communication systems. The construction of turbines may also have an impact on an individual;

(b) It may be the case that national laws lay down criteria within the meaning of article 9, paragraph 3, that relate to damage to the environment at large, in which case there may be access to justice because of potential damage to habitats, plant and animal species, or architectural and cultural heritage.

99. This list is not exhaustive. There may well be other factors to take into account on a case-by-case basis.

100. In this context, the Committee notes that the law of the Party concerned lays down criteria for standing that relate to the impact of a decision or activity on an individual. The factors listed in paragraph 98 (a) above may therefore be among those relevant for the reviewing bodies of the Party concerned to consider when examining whether its criteria for standing are met.

101. The Committee does not consider that in each and every case that a wind turbine is constructed all the considerations in paragraph 98 (a) will apply; but the Committee is convinced that it would not be consistent with the criteria laid down by the Party concerned, and therefore, with article 9, paragraph 3, to exclude standing to challenge an act or omission concerning a wind turbine only with reference to distance. It follows that the Committee does not consider it would be legitimate to exclude from standing everyone more than a certain distance, for example 1.5 kilometres, away from a turbine, on the basis of distance alone.

102. In the circumstances of the case before the Committee, and in particular because of the County Administrative Board of Södermanland's reference to the criteria laid down in the national law (see para. 90 above), the Committee has not found conclusive evidence that the Swedish review bodies only took distance into account. However, if the review bodies of the Party concerned were indeed to take only distance into account in determining standing to challenge wind turbine decisions, this would not be consistent with the criteria it has laid down in its national law, and thus with article 9, paragraph 3, of the Convention.

103. Nevertheless, for the reason given in the paragraph above, the Committee finds that it does not have conclusive evidence to find that the Party concerned was in non-compliance with article 9, paragraph 3, in the circumstances of the present case.

Article 9, paragraph 4

104. The communicant has alleged that the County Administrative Board is an organization through which political power is exerted and this disregards the right of citizens to independent and impartial justice in matters relating to their environment.

105. A biased review procedure would fail to deliver the fair remedies required by article 9, paragraph 4; but no evidence of bias has been put before the Committee and in any event the Board's decision was subject to appeal. The Committee therefore finds the communicant's allegation to be unsubstantiated.

106. The communicant also alleges that the Parliamentary Ombudsmen cannot give access to effective remedies; but in any event a complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman is one of several remedies available. No evidence has been put before the Committee to indicate that the other available remedies are ineffective; in this respect the communicant could have taken the issue to the courts, but failed to do so. The Committee therefore finds the communicant's allegation with respect to the availability of effective remedies to be unsubstantiated.

IV. Conclusions

107. Having considered the above, the Committee finds that the Party concerned is not in non-compliance with articles 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the Convention in the circumstances of this case.
