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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

Meeting of the Parties to the
Convention on Access to Information,
Public Participation in Decision-making and
Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

Working Group of the Parties to the Convention
(Third meeting, Geneva, 1-3 November 2004)
(Item 7 of the provisional agenda)

REPORT OF THE THIRD MEETING OF THE TASK FORCE
ON ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS

1.   The third meeting of the Task Force on Electronic Information Tools established by the Meeting of the Parties (decision I/6) was held in Geneva on 1-2 July 2004.

2.   The meeting was attended by experts designated by the Governments of Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

3.   The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) were also represented.

4.   The following international non-governmental and regional organizations were represented: European ECO Forum, European Public Health Alliance – Environment Network (Belgium), GRID/Arendal, Milieukontakt Oost-Europa (Netherlands) and the Russian Environmental Federal Information Agency (REFIA, Russian Federation).

5.   The following national non-governmental organizations were represented: BlueLink Information Network (Bulgaria), EKO-NET Center for electronic communication (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and StrawberryNet (Romania).

6.   The Chair of the Task Force, Ms. Svetlana Zhekova (Bulgaria), opened the meeting and welcomed the participants to Geneva.

I.   ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

7.   Having regard to its mandate, the Task Force agreed upon the following agenda for its work:

   (a) Opening of the meeting;
   (b) Adoption of the agenda;
   (c) Relevant developments and processes;
   (d) Capacity-building activities;
   (e) Draft recommendations on the more effective use of electronic information tools to promote the implementation of the Convention;
   (f) Clearing-house mechanism;
   (g) Innovative use of electronic information tools in processes under the Convention;
   (h) Priority themes at the regional and sub-regional levels;
   (i) Conclusions and next steps;
   (j) Any other business;
   (k) Adoption of the report and close of the meeting.

II.   RELEVANT DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES

8.   The secretariat gave a brief presentation on the latest developments with regard to the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society (http://www.itu.int/wsis/), in particular the outcome of the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the Summit (Hammamet, Tunisia, 24-26 June 2004). The secretariat also informed the Task Force of the activities of the Information Society Team, an interdivisional team within UNECE, which had been set up to coordinate the UNECE regional input into the preparatory process for the Summit as well as to contribute to the process of mainstreaming information and communication technology (ICT) into UNECE processes and activities.

9.   The secretariat briefly presented the web site "Electronic Tools Task Force" which was maintained by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) (http://www.rec.org/e-aarhus). The site had been recently updated and contained, inter alia, the results of the three needs audits conducted by the current and former Task Forces on Electronic Information Tools.

10.   Mr. Alexander Fedorov (REFIA) demonstrated automated methods of updating web portals which had been developed and were currently in use in the Russian Federation. Such methodologies, based on a strong classification schema and screening of electronic databases and web sites, were designed to interface with European electronic reporting systems (e.g. Report-NET) and could be applied to the UNECE Aarhus clearing house. Multilingual translation services, dynamic web graphics and automated notification of users were also demonstrated.

11.   Mr. Chris Jarvis (United Kingdom), the Vice-Chairman of the Task Force, presented information on the E-Public Register project undertaken by the Environment Agency for England and Wales, which aimed to provide strategic direction for the development of

environmental information initiatives and increase public participation in environmental decision-making.

12.   Ms. Milena Georgieva (BlueLink) informed the Task Force about the project "ICT Implementation of the Aarhus Convention" recently launched by Milieukontakt Oost-Europa in cooperation with BlueLink Information Network and Erina Journalists Legal Environmental Center (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), through which NGOs shared experiences and information on their work by means of content sharing in the English language through a web site (http://www.see-environment.info) and related electronic tools capacity-building activities.

13.   Mr. Vlatko Trpeski (EKO.NET) informed the Task Force of the establishment of the "Aarhus Family" in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which is dedicated to development of a mechanism of use of ICT for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in the country. A web portal and weekly environmental news service had been successfully launched (http://www.eko.net.mk/aarhus).

14.   The Chair noted the impressive progress and multiple opportunities for partnerships to promote electronic information tools that had been accomplished since the previous meeting of the Task Force.

III.   CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

15.   Mr. Chris Jarvis updated the Task Force on the capacity-building project for Eastern Europe, the Caucusus and Central Asia supported by the United Kingdom's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and involving UNEP and UNECE. A dedicated workshop on the development of electronic information networks had been held in St Petersburg (Russian Federation) in May 2004 and resulted in the development of an action plan and a proposal to launch three pilot projects in Minsk, Pskov (Russian Federation) and Kyiv by May 2005.

16.   The secretariat briefly informed the Task Force of its address on opportunities for supporting the implementation of the Aarhus Convention at the conference "Financing Technology for the Environment" sponsored by the Tech Museum Awards Forum and held on 15 June 2004 in San Francisco (United Sates).

17.   The Chair welcomed these capacity-building activities and the consideration of partnerships with the ICT sector in the future work of the Task Force. The secretariat was requested to update the Task Force on any future discussions with ICT sector representatives.

IV.   DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE MORE EFFECTIVE
USE OF ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS

18.   The Task Force, taking into consideration the request of the Working Group of the Parties to conclude its work with a view to submitting draft recommendations at its next meeting with a special emphasis on the practical aspects of applying electronic tools to the Working Group, continued to review the document 'Draft recommendations on the more effective use of electronic tools to provide public access to environmental information' which had been partially discussed at its second meeting (MP.PP/WG.1/2004/4, annex I).

19.   The paragraphs dealing with institutional development and capacity-building and the clearing-house mechanism had been considered only briefly at the previous meeting so the Task Force proceeded to discuss these in more detail, making various amendments to the text.

20.   The Task Force then resumed its discussion on the legislative framework. Following a first round of comments, the Chair and Vice-Chair with the assistance of the secretariat prepared a revised version of these paragraphs. The new text was discussed by the Task Force and various amendments were made and areas of outstanding disagreement were reflected through the use of square brackets.

21.   During the discussion, the main points raised were as follows:

    (a) Several experts expressed concern about the references to legislative frameworks, while others felt that having an adequate legislative framework was an important aspect of promoting better use of electronic tools. As a compromise it was agreed to remove the reference to legislative framework from the title and to tone down other references to legislative frameworks;
    (b) Several experts felt that dividing the list of types of information into two, as had been discussed at the previous meeting (MP.PP/WG.1/2004/4, para. 27) was useful, with one list containing types of information which should generally be available through the Internet, in line with identified user needs, and the second list containing types of information which should be made available only 'to the extent feasible and appropriate.' However, some experts preferred to have a single list and expressed some concerns about the strength of the obligations, albeit non-legally binding, attaching to the first list (para. 9);
    (c) It was generally felt that the concept of information 'progressively being made available' contained in article 5, paragraph 3, of the Convention could usefully be clarified in the recommendations and it was agreed to include a new paragraph following paragraph 9 to this end;
    (d) The Task Force decided not to include any text on the question of charging for information and the relevant paragraph of the draft was deleted.

22.   On the basis of the comments made during the discussion, the Task Force amended the text and agreed to transmit the revised text to the Working Group of the Parties as an addendum to its report (MP.PP/WG.1/2004/12/Add.1).[1]

23.   Several experts expressed reservations with respect to paragraph 9 of the new draft of the recommendations and preferred to come back to them at the next meeting of the Working Group of the Parties. They expressed the view that some elements fell outside the mandate of the Task

Force and should rather be regulated by the Convention and by national legislation. The Chair pointed out that the Task Force was a body of experts and that the political decisions would in any case be taken initially by the Working Group of the Parties and ultimately by the Meeting of the Parties.

V.   CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

24.   The secretariat used the occasion of the Task Force's meeting to formally launch the Aarhus Convention's clearing-house mechanism. Mr. Kaj Bärlund, Director of the UNECE Environment and Human Settlements Division, addressed the Task Force on the significance of the launch of the Aarhus clearing house to the implementation of Convention and principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. He thanked GRID-Arendal for its work on the development of the clearing house and thanked the governments of Norway, Germany and the Netherlands for their generous support of the project. The secretariat then presented the Aarhus Clearing House for Environmental Democracy (http://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org) to the Task Force.

25.   On behalf of the Task Force, the Chair welcomed the launch of the clearing house and encouraged support for its successful future development.

VI.   INNOVATIVE USE OF ELECTRONIC INFORMATION TOOLS IN PROCESSES UNDER THE CONVENTION

26.   Mr. Jorge Ocana (UNITAR) presented the Virtual Classroom on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs)(http://prtrvc.unitar.org) and invited experts to register and use this innovative electronic tool to support implementation of the Protocol on PRTRs.

27.   The secretariat presented for the consideration of the Task Force a system of web-based electronic reporting being developed by UNECE for use by Parties, Signatories and other States to report on implementation, or activities related to implementation, of the Convention in preparation for the second meeting of the Parties. Use of such a reporting system would be voluntary. The system would enable electronic submission of responses to questions (contained in decision 1/8) and the review of such responses by the public. Registered users could also comment on the information contained in the responses.

28.   The Task Force welcomed the initiative of the secretariat to prepare a web-based electronic reporting system for use in reporting on the implementation of the Convention.

VII.   PRIORITY THEMES AT THE REGIONAL AND SUBREGIONAL LEVELS

29.   The Chair noted that no communications had been received by the secretariat on this item and it was agreed that for the time being it would be dropped from further consideration.

VIII.   CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

30.   The Task Force discussed its possible next steps on the basis of an informal paper prepared by the Chair and Vice-Chair with the assistance of the secretariat.

31.   The Task Force agreed to the following next steps in fulfilment of its existing mandate:

(a) Development of a draft decision on electronic information tools, to be agreed through a written consultation, for consideration at the Working Group of the Parties and possible adoption at the second meeting of the Parties (see endnote 1);

(b) Maintenance and further development of the clearing-house mechanism, including capacity-building in support of the national nodes of the clearing house.

32.   The Task Force further agreed to propose a number of steps for inclusion in its future work programme beyond the second meeting of the Parties. These have been incorporated in MP.PP/WG.1/2004/12/Add1.

IX.   ADOPTION OF THE REPORT AND CLOSE OF THE MEETING

33.   As no other issues were raised under any other business, the Chair thanked the experts for their substantial work and the secretariat and interpreters for their support of the work of the Task Force, and closed the meeting.

<u>Note</u>

1/ The Bureau of the Meeting of the Parties subsequently decided that the draft recommendations should be incorporated within the framework of a draft decision which would also set out a new mandate for the Task Force.