



Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Factsheet

The OSCE and the Aarhus Convention

The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) was adopted in Aarhus, Denmark, on 25 June 1998, and is administered by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

The Aarhus Convention establishes that sustainable development can be achieved only through the involvement of all concerned parties. It builds directly on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration by linking government accountability to environmental protection and, through its focus on interactions between the public and state authorities, promotes democratic processes.

The Convention grants the public rights in terms of access to information, public participation and access to justice in governmental decision-making processes, on matters concerning the local, national and trans-boundary environment.

- 1) **Access to environmental information** – the right of everyone to receive environmental information that is held by state authorities. This can include information on the state of the environment, but also on policies or measures taken/to be taken, or on the state of human health and safety where this can be affected by the state of the environment;
- 2) **Public participation in environmental decision-making** – the right to participate in environmental decision-making by e.g. commenting on environmental draft laws, projects and programmes;
- 3) **Access to justice** – the right to review procedures and challenge public decisions that are made without respecting the two aforementioned rights and national environmental law in general.

In this way the Convention reflects and promotes, with a cross-dimensional approach, the link between citizens' rights and environmental protection. The OSCE support towards the establishment of information centres is an important factor towards facilitating environmental governance processes, at the national level.

It is important to note, that the Convention is unique in its links between environmental protection and governmental accountability, transparency and responsiveness. Whereas most multilateral environmental agreements establish obligations in an international context, the Aarhus Convention entails obligations on the relevant national authorities, towards the public.

Since 2003, the OSCE has been supporting the creation of Aarhus Centres and Public Environmental Information Centres (PEIC), in close co-operation with the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative, a partnership between OSCE, UNEP, UNDP, UNECE, REC, as well as NATO as an associate partner.



What is the OSCE?

The OSCE comprises 56 participating States and encompasses three continents – North America, Europe and Asia – and more than a billion people. It works for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation.

With a multi-faceted approach to security and 19 field operations, it offers the region a forum for political dialogue and negotiations and a platform for multilateral partnerships that pursue practical work on the ground.

The mandate of the OSCE recognises the need to address security challenges in a co-operative and comprehensive way. Focusing on three dimensions – the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human dimension – the OSCE deals with a wide range of security issues, including arms control, preventive diplomacy, confidence- and security-building measures, human rights, election monitoring, democratisation as well as economic and environmental activities.

Promoting the Aarhus Centre Model

The Aarhus Convention constitutes an important tool in the achievement of the Maastricht Strategy for the Economic and Environmental Dimension and: 'Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security'. The Maastricht Strategy commits the participating States to achieving sustainable development and supports the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, the UN Millennium Declaration, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

With this in mind, the OSCE has been actively promoting, in close collaboration with the Aarhus Convention Secretariat, the ratification and implementation of the Aarhus Convention. Since 2002, the Office of the Co-ordinator for OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) and OSCE field presences have been supporting the development of Public Environmental Information Centres (PEICs) and Aarhus Centres in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, South Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe. These initiatives have helped provide a forum through which State officials from environment related ministries and members of environmental NGOs can meet to discuss and resolve environmental issues.

The Centres provide a meeting place and a link between the government, individuals, businesses, academia, judiciary and civil society. The main objective is to improve the outreach of activities and environmental information to citizens, thereby increasing their awareness and possibility to influence their natural environment. Well informed and engaged citizens play a major role in achieving a sound, legitimate and effective environmental policy.

Examples of Aarhus Centre activities

- Raising awareness on local environmental issues through all forms of media.
- Providing the public and decision-makers with easy access to environmental information.
- Re-packaging environmental information in a user-friendly and attractive format.
- Engaging government and civil society and the private sector in dialogue and information exchange.
- Raising public awareness of environmental issues through organizing meetings and seminars on specific topics.
- Promoting participation in environmental decision-making by arranging public hearings on various national documents, including legislation.
- Organizing training for journalists, judicial staff, school children and other target groups.
- Providing free legal advice to citizens and organisations on environmental matters.

To date, the OSCE has supported the establishment of Aarhus Centres in 7 countries.

- **Albania**
- **Armenia**
- **Azerbaijan**
- **Belarus**
- **Georgia**
- **Kyrgyzstan**
- **Tajikistan**

South Caucasus

The first centre in Armenia was established in Yerevan with support of the OSCE in May 2002. It was the first such Centre in a former Soviet republic and is now fully funded by the national budget. Its



activities were initially aimed at promoting public awareness, in particular through the media, and it has hosted several competitions for journalists. Another core activity of the Centre has been the facilitation of public participation and in particular in regards to the national report of Armenia to the Aarhus Convention. A draft version was posted on the Centre's website, for comments from the public, and adapted into a final draft.

The first local office outside of the capital was opened on 30 June 2006, in Kapan, which served as a successful example for a further establishment of seven Centres in other provinces of the country. The role of these regional Centres is crucial, as the environmental situation is more delicate and access to information more limited in rural areas. With the aim to strengthen the linkages between the existing Centres, a regional PEICs network was established in Armenia which, among others, provides a platform for exchanging experiences.

In Azerbaijan, an Aarhus Centre was established in the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources in Baku in 2003. Consisting of a library, internet facilities, and a conference room, the Aarhus Centre provided a venue for over 100 public meetings on environmental issues between 2004-6. The Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, with the support of the OSCE, is planning to establish a regional network of Aarhus centres throughout the country, with two regional centres scheduled to become operational in Ganja and Kazakh.

In Tbilisi, Georgia, a PEIC was established in December 2005, with the support of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, and offers access to a specialised library, the internet, legal expertise and a plethora of environmental information. The centre is an example of close co-operation with the Ministry of Environment Protection and National Resources of Georgia and strengthens the cooperation between the government and the public. Two regional centres are to be opened in the region of South Ossetia with the aim of enhancing cooperation between Ossetian and Georgian populations on issues of environmental degradation.

Central Asia – The Ferghana Valley

In Kyrgyzstan, an Environmental Information Centre was opened in Osh, in December 2004, and hosted a series of meetings related

to the ENVSEC in-depth-assessment of environment and security links in the Ferghana Valley.

The first Aarhus Centre was opened in Dushanbe in September 2003, and in April 2005, a regional ENVSEC supported centre was opened in Khujand. The activities focus on improving cross-border co-operation in the Ferghana Valley and on raising awareness of environment-security linkages through promoting public participation in environmental decision making, in particular related to key issues identified through an Ferghana Valley ENVSEC assessment.

Another main activity of the Centres in the region is organising hands-on training to practicing journalists, from the countries, on investigative and analytical approaches to covering environment and security issues and linkages in the media.

Above all, the activities of the Centres in the Ferghana are focused on raising the environmental awareness and increasing the participation of the population in environmental concerns in the region.

Recently established Centres in Albania and Belarus

The Environmental Information Centre in Tirana, Albania, was created with support from the Albanian Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Water Administration and the ENVSEC Initiative and was formally opened in December 2006.

The Centre features a specialised library and an internet facility and has developed a package of measures to encourage the implementation of the Aarhus Convention, under a Memorandum of Understanding between the OSCE Presence and the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Water Administration.

In Belarus, the National Environmental Information Centre was opened in November 2005, under a joint partnership of the OSCE Office in Minsk and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources. The OSCE Office in Minsk carried out the project in the first year and donated equipment to the Centre. Since its establishment, the Centre has actively promoted the Convention, has answered requests for information and provided legal consultations upon request.



Support to the third pillar

Since coming into force, the process of implementation of the Aarhus Convention has triggered development of national legislation and institutional improvements in the environmental field in many countries.

This progress is very encouraging. However, a regional Aarhus Centre /PEIC managers' workshop organized by the OSCE in Gudauri, Georgia, in September 2006, noted that the support to the 3rd pillar (Access to justice) of the Aarhus Convention could be strengthened. Based on the conclusions of this meeting, the OSCE is supporting additional activities to promote the third pillar in the ongoing work of Aarhus Centres.

In this respect, the OCEEA has begun to work closer with the Aarhus Secretariat and in particular, the Task Force on Access to Justice, established by the Parties in May 2005. The Task Force suggested that initial capacity building activities be aimed at supporting the judiciary, if possible at all levels, particularly in countries with economies in transition. It went on to propose that while the independence of the judiciary should be fully respected, the main objectives should be (a) to increase awareness of the convention among the judiciary; and (b) to enable them to exercise their discretion in a way that promotes effective implementation of the Convention's article 9 (Access to Justice). In this respect, the OSCE, in collaboration with the Aarhus Convention, organised training for Court judges, including Supreme and Constitutional Courts, and Judicial Training Centre staff from the EECCA countries, in Kyiv on 4-5 June 2007.

Aarhus Centres and PEIC's on the Internet

With public networks in place, an element of public information is ensured. The OSCE has supported the creation of several websites, in correlation with centres being established, and encourages the generation of further such initiatives.

Some examples of Centre websites:

Albania: <http://www.aic.org.al/>

Armenia: www.armaarhus.am

Azerbaijan: www.aarhuscenter.az

Georgia: <http://aarhus.dsl.ge>

Tajikistan: www.aarhus.tj

Other sources of information:

OCEEA website, Aarhus component:
www.osce.org/eea/13471.html

Aarhus Convention:
<http://www.unece.org/env/pp/welcome.html>

Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC):
www.envsec.org

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