



United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE: FUNDAMENTAL TOOLS FOR A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

**Side Event at the World Summit on Sustainable Development
Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa
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**Opening remarks by Mrs B. Schmögnerová, Executive Secretary,
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

It gives me pleasure to welcome all of you here today. I am doing so on behalf of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe and the United Nations Economic Commissions for Europe, who have jointly organized this side event.

The event addresses a topic which is of key importance in the context of the Summit. There is a growing acceptance that sustainable development must involve good governance and the co-operation and participation of many stakeholders, including the general public. Without active civil society involvement, sustainable development will be unattainable. The crucial role of the public was already recognised in Rio, in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The question is then, how to go forward from Rio, taking account of the ongoing debates on the need for good governance and on the linkage between environmental issues and human rights.

In my capacity as Executive Secretary of UNECE, I am pleased to say that the ECE region has made great strides forward in this area since the Rio conference, notably through the adoption in 1998 of the Aarhus Convention - the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. The Convention has been described by the UN Secretary-General as 'the most ambitious venture in environmental democracy undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations [whose] adoption was a remarkable step forward in the development of international law'.

The Aarhus Convention is unique among multilateral environmental agreements in the extent to which it gives rights to the public. Thus it can be seen as an instrument linking environmental issues with the human rights sphere.

The Convention entered into force last October and the Parties to the Convention will hold their first meeting this coming October. To date, 22 countries have become Parties. Many of these are from the poorer countries of our region - Central and Eastern Europe and States of the former Soviet Union (CIS) - underlining the point that environmental rights should not be regarded as a luxury reserved for the rich nations.

NGOs were involved in the development of the Convention, to an extent

unprecedented in the negotiation of any international law. This was considered necessary to ensure the relevance of the text to the actual needs and concerns of members of the public likely to be seeking to exercise rights of information, participation and justice. NGOs have continued to be actively involved in the implementation process.

The Convention was not reached in a single step. In 1995, Ministers meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, at the Third Ministerial 'Environment for Europe' conference endorsed a set of guidelines on the same topic. The Sofia Guidelines served as a stepping stone to the Convention.

There can be no doubt that taking a region-wide approach has been an enormous stimulus to activities promoting environmental democracy at all levels within the ECE region. Other regions may wish to consider developing different regional instruments promoting environmental democracy, either of a binding or a non-binding character. But perhaps the Aarhus Convention can serve as a useful model or reference point in that context. It represents one approach, which has so far proved successful in our region.

The Aarhus Convention is open to accession by any Member State of the United Nations, not only by UNECE member states. For some countries outside the ECE region, this possibility may be of interest. The UNECE is willing to share with other regions the experience we have gained through developing the Aarhus Convention, as well as to learn from the experiences gained in other regions. We welcome the recent decision by ESCAP to develop guidelines on information, participation and justice and have pledged our support to that process.

We have today a distinguished panel of speakers representing different regions and different areas of expertise. It is a wide-ranging topic and there is only limited time, so panellists are asked to limit their statements to 4 minutes to allow time for discussion. I am hopeful that we will have a fruitful exchange of views in the next 90 minutes and that this will contribute to a dialogue, or many dialogues, which will continue in the coming months and years and which will lay the basis for better governance, more respect for citizens' environmental rights and greater involvement of civil society in shaping the decisions which in turn shape the future of the planet.