



PRESS RELEASE

[\[Index\]](#)

Geneva, 27 August 2002

UNECE holds side-event on participatory democracy and good governance at World Summit on Sustainable Development

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), in cooperation with the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) and the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, organized a side event on "Participatory democracy and good governance as fundamental tools for a human rights approach to sustainable development". The event took place on Monday, 26 August 2002, from 1.15 to 2.45 pm, in the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg.

The side event, which was chaired by Ms. Brigita Schmögnerová, UNECE Executive Secretary, focussed on strengthening environmental rights and their contribution to sustainable development within the framework of good governance and respect for human rights. It thereby aimed to promote the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (in particular principle 10 on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice) and to integrate social and economic development and environmental protection.

A panel of distinguished speakers, comprising Ministers, parliamentarians and representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations from different regions, took part in the event. The discussions highlighted the importance of an integrated approach to sustainable development and provided an opportunity for participants from different regions to exchange information and perspectives on how the principles of environmental democracy, human rights and good governance in sustainable development may be put into practice. There was a common recognition of the importance of good governance, respect for human rights and involvement of civil society in the process of moving towards sustainable development.

In her opening remarks, the UNECE Executive Secretary emphasised that without active civil society involvement, sustainable development would be unattainable. She noted that in this regard, great strides had been made in the ECE region since the Rio conference, notably through the adoption and entry into force of the Aarhus Convention¹. While other regions might wish to consider developing their own instruments promoting environmental democracy, the Aarhus Convention could serve as a useful model or reference point in that context. To this end, UNECE would be willing to share with other regions the experience gained through developing the Aarhus Convention.

Ms. Cheryl Gillwald, Deputy Minister for Justice, South Africa, welcomed the participants on behalf of the host country, mentioning that South Africa's bill of rights includes environmental rights. Stressing the need for an integrated and incremental approach, she highlighted the importance of addressing inequality and tackling poverty in order to bridge the gap between ambitious human rights goals and delivery on the ground.

Mr. Božo Kovacevic, Croatian Minister of Environmental Protection and Physical Planning, explained that a wide range of instruments was needed to achieve good governance goals. Croatia was working towards ratification of the Aarhus Convention and expected to be in a position to ratify in approximately one year's time.

Mr. Víctor Lichtinger, Mexican Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, described recent and ongoing steps to strengthen the legal framework governing access to environmental information in Mexico. He highlighted the importance of distinguishing between law and practice, noting that capacity building was of great importance and that significant costs may be involved in guaranteeing access to information and public participation. He called for cooperation mechanisms to facilitate implementation of existing legislation in developing countries.

Mr. Olivier Deleuze, Secretary of State for Energy and Sustainable Development, Belgium, noted that recognition of the link between human rights and the environment could be traced back to the Stockholm conference in 1972. He described the participatory process that had been used to formulate a federal plan for sustainable development in Belgium.

Ms. Gabriella Dragoni Battaini, Director-General, General Directorate for Social Cohesion, Council of Europe, introduced a political message from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to the WSSD, which promoted a human rights-based approach to sustainable development. She described the Council's efforts to develop legal instruments relevant to the topic, including laws to combat corruption.

Prof. Svitlana Kravchenko, European ECO Forum, referred to the importance of the Aarhus Convention to

civil society in the ECE region. She described the unique role that civil society organizations had played and continued to play in the development and implementation of the Convention. It was expected that the compliance mechanism being developed under the Convention would be accessible to the public.

Mr. Alexander Juras, Deputy Executive Director, REC, outlined a number of preconditions for good governance, including new and independent institutions, internationally binding agreements, and the recognition of a fundamental human right to good governance. He described the tremendous impact which the Aarhus Convention had had in Central and Eastern Europe, a region in which the dismantling of decades of authoritarian rule had brought the issues of environmental protection and participatory democracy into sharp focus.

Mr. Shafqat Kakakhel, Deputy Executive Director, UNEP, outlined UNEP's efforts to identify mechanisms for the implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration and stressed the need for capacity-building to back up the adoption of legislation. He described the Aarhus Convention as the most the spectacular example of the realisation of Principle 10 and pledged to continue the close co-operation between UNEP and the Convention secretariat, as well as to strengthen the co-operation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on exploring the linkages between human rights and environmental protection.

Prof. Ben Turok, Member of Parliament (Committees on Finances, Trade and Industry), South Africa, spelled out the complexities in addressing good governance in South Africa, including the need to create new institutions and reform public services. He expressed concern that the current global order would remain exploitative and unequal, and called for greater equality and respect for human rights.

Mr. Alan Meale, Member of Parliament, United Kingdom, representing the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, underlined the success of the European Union in enabling democratic processes and implementing Agenda 21. He stressed the need to further engage the public in decision-making.

During the discussion, participants described relevant activities in countries such as Yugoslavia, Israel, Pakistan, Morocco and Moldova, as well as relevant international projects and activities such as the Access Initiative, the UNEP-funded assessment of the global implementation of principle 10 of the Rio Declaration undertaken by the European ECO Forum and work being undertaken within the framework of the Commission on Human Rights. A representative of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific region informed the meeting of the proposed guidelines on access to information, public participation and access to justice for that region, to be developed with the support of ECE.

Closing the packed meeting, the Chair noted the broad support for better governance, more respect for citizens' environmental rights and greater involvement of civil society and urged further co-operation to this end.

For further information, please contact:

Mr. Jeremy Wates, Secretary to the Aarhus Convention
Environment and Human Settlements Division
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
Palais des Nations
CH - 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Phone: +41(0)22 917 23 84
Fax: +41(0)22 907 01 07
E-mail: jeremy.wates@unece.org
Web site: www.unece.org/env/pp

¹ The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted in Aarhus, Denmark, in June 1998 and entered into force in October 2001. It has been described by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan 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'.

Ref: ECE/ENV/02/08

[Print this page](#)

Last updated: Wed, 16 Nov 2005 17:22:41 GMT
© [United Nations Economic Commission for Europe](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#)