

**Executive summary by Austria  
on the Aarhus Workshop on public participation in strategic  
decision-making (PPSD)  
Sofia, 3–4 December 2007**

The Aarhus workshop in Sofia was the first workshop bringing together experts from the SEA Protocol under the Espoo Convention and from the Aarhus Convention, both UNECE Environmental Conventions. 44 participants, mainly from NGOs but also several governmental experts attended the meeting. 3 Aarhus focal points were present (Bulgaria, Austria and Latvia) as well as several Espoo focal points and SEA experts, both Convention secretariats were represented. The workshop saw 12 speakers including one of the European Commission presenting good practice examples in different areas, 7 speakers from the EU and EEA area, 1 from the SEE region and 3 of the EECCA region.

When asked for their prime background and interest, participants gave us the following rather balanced feed-back:

Participants double and/or multiple ticks were allowed	Prime background and interest in the Aarhus Convention	Prime background and interest in the Espoo Convention/SEA Protocol	Other background e.g. general interest or interested in both areas equally
Total number: 44	20	19	23

**All documents including a full list of participants are available under <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/ppsd.htm>**

The agenda of the workshop focused as mentioned above on presenting good practices. This had been decided by Aarhus Parties at their Second Meeting of Parties and at their 6<sup>th</sup> Working Group in 2005 respectively 2006.

A workshop compendium in English and Russian consisting of the agenda, the abstracts of good practice examples as well as an initial analysis had been prepared in advance by Austria. The text was based on the input received and on the main considerations set by the Working Group at its Sixth Working Group meeting. A general session was included as to provide a certain minimum overview on the general experience, it consisted of 3 speakers.

Mr David Aspinwall, a UK Expert with a long experience in the European Commission and on SEA, gave a general overview on the distinct instruments covering public participation in the whole UNECE area, amongst which the SEA Protocol and the Aarhus Convention and other UNECE conventions.

Mr Jerzy Jendroska, member of the Aarhus Compliance Committee, then presented his view on the scope of article 7 and 8 of the Aarhus Convention and highlighted the Polish legal situation. He also mentioned various plans and strategies for which an SEA was not required per se.

Mr Jonathan Parker, European Commission DG ENV, reported on the European Commission's experience with SEA in respect of the operational programmes for

structural funds. He illustrated the experience by hinting at the differences in the SEA application referring distinctly to single Member States.

The next session was titled **public participation with respect to legislation**. Ms Leila Wieth-Knudsen, the Danish Espoo focal point presented the long and rich Danish experience and procedures on legislation.

Mr Ilya Trombitsky from Eco-Tiras, a Moldovan NGO, illustrated the procedures of the Moldovan parliament giving internet access to draft laws and the right of commenting to a parliamentary committee. He pointed out the positive experience of this specific case but also described the challenges of the current administrative situation in his country given the very limited overall resources in the related ministries.

The third session focussed on **public participation in specific sectors**. Ms Jacqueline Metodieva from the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water presented the legal situation for PPSD. She stressed that interest in public participation at national level differs from that in local situations and that people seem to be more active in more focussed topics e.g. those happening in their local vicinity. Mr Jorgen Brun, an EIA/SEA expert from the Norwegian Ministry of Environment, presented a case study on the regional land use plan for the development of wind energy in Rogaland, a south-western Norwegian region. In his presentation he tried to cover pros and cons of the approach taken in that specific case.

The first day was finished by a session on **PPSD regarding policies**. Ms Laure Tourjansky from the French Ministry of Ecology presented us a very lively case study on the public debate on transport policy in Southern France. She positively underlined co-operation between the two national ministries of ecology and that of infrastructure and transport both funding the activities. The outcome of this process will now be fed into French public environmental Grenelle debates.

Mr Grebnev from the CARnet NGO in Kyrgyzstan highlighted the significance of this internet portal as a basis for information and exchange of views in the EECCA region. He mentioned the daily update of information and over 35,000 requests per month. The portal also serves to stimulate discussion on selected environmental topics.

On the second day we continued again on **PPSD in specific sectors**.

Ms Kerstin Arbter, the Austrian team's consultant for the compendium and an experienced SEA expert, presented the SEA process for the 2007 Viennese waste management plan. In this case the SEA and the related planning process were merged and use was made of roundtable workshops for authorities and interest groups as well as of different media to inform the larger public.

Ms Azganush Drnoyan from the Armenian Ministry of Nature Protection presented a case study on the public participation process in the development of its Water Code.

We then moved to PPSD on the local and national level again. Nick Wates, a UK consultant, presented the Aylesham Masterplan, a local public participation process for revitalising a small town in a former coal mining region. He also pointed at

different materials used to convey messages to the broader public, amongst which leaflets and visualised maps.

The situation of public participation in the town of Danilovgrad in Montenegro was presented by Ms Natasha Durakovic representing a NGO. The project included several public debates and attempts to reach the public. The positive experience of Danilovgrad influencing other projects was underlined.

The last presentation by Thedora Dönsz from a large Hungarian NGO focussed again on experience with operational programmes i.e. on the Hungarian Rural Development Plan and Programme from a national and NGO angle. After efforts to engage a consultancy had failed, the NGO got in contact with its national ministry of agriculture to organize the public participation process as such. While a lot of efforts were carried out, the relations amongst stakeholders including the responsible ministry and the organizing NGO were described as somehow complex and difficult in the end.

A final **panel discussion** saw initial comments by David Aspinwall, Jeremy Wates, Magda Toth and Kerstin Arbter. Almost naturally, these personal comments were fairly heterogeneous and obviously reflected to some extent general aspects e.g. capacity building and on the workshop's usefulness. While Magda Toth from the REC stressed the importance of legislation and called for harmonization if appropriate, David Aspinwall and Jeremy Wates were somehow more cautious and also noted the necessary large degree of flexibility and heterogeneity.

It also was noted that the methods must be tailored to the specific issue and level. Participants remarked also the significance of differing resources which are necessary to secure such processes but are not naturally given. The valuable bridge-building exercise of the workshop was also highlighted by some.

Kerstin Arbter pointed out that success factors in practice always also included motivation and social competences of both those organizing and those taking part in the process. She therefore stressed the need of social competence including having some fun when undertaking such activities.

### **A final look back from our standpoint**

It was likely and not unexpected from the outset that preparing and assessing such a workshop or its results, if any, would be difficult. Some would plea for more legislation or for calling it an exclusive Aarhus domain, others would see further legislation in contrast with the complexity and diversity of strategic decision making, some would complain on individual administrations or circumstances and again others would look at drawing lessons in a heterogeneous and globalized world where national administrations are under considerable pressure as well. Despite of good intentions, such divergent starting points would then again lead to divergent expectation on the follow-up and on drawing early general assumptions.

After an intense preparation process, we had to choose amongst the examples provided to us which, despite our hopefully clear instructions, got fairly heterogeneous. We found it difficult if not impossible to assess the circumstances which are different from Party to Party and we noted that fact also in the compendium.

Despite one may find a fly in any ointment, we think that some of the examples could be called best practise examples. Without having any detailed information and without knowing in all detail the individual framework conditions we rather speak of good practise examples though some of them might be even “Rolls Royce models” as one native speaker called them. In many of them considerable resources in terms of time, finance and other efforts were invested e.g. in the case of Aylesham in the United Kingdom, in the Viennese or in the French case and in all of them we noted efforts from all sides but different results due to complex political, social, administrative and other elements.

It is our conviction that such a workshop does not need necessarily a follow-up but that in this area Parties of each or both conventions should find processes and if appropriate further steps in co-ordination with their appropriate counterparts and other stakeholders to the benefit of a common future and environment.

As pointed out in the compendium already, we are more convinced than ever that only a united approach of both or all relevant conventions is recommendable.

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