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Access to Information, Public Participation
in Decision-making and Access to Justice
in Environmental Matters

Working Group of the Parties

Twenty-ninth meeting

Geneva, 2–4 July 2025

Item 3 (b) of the provisional agenda

Substantive issues: public participation in decision-making

Report of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making on its eleventh meeting

Summary

At its second extraordinary session (Geneva, 19 and 22 April and 30 June 2010), the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters established the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making through decision EMP.II/1 (ECE/MP.PP/2010/2/Add.1). The mandate of the Task Force was further extended in time by the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention through decision VII/2 on promoting effective public participation in decision-making (ECE/MP.PP/2021/2/Add.1), adopted at its seventh session (Geneva, 18–21 October 2021). Paragraph 13 of decision VII/2 sets out the issues to be addressed by the Task Force.

In accordance with the above-mentioned mandate, the report of the Task Force on its eleventh meeting (Geneva, 12–13 December 2024) is being submitted to the Working Group of the Parties for its consideration.



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Introduction

1. The eleventh meeting of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) was held in Geneva on 12–13 December 2024.¹
2. The meeting was attended by representatives of the following Parties to the Convention: Armenia, Austria, France, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Switzerland and Uzbekistan. A representative of the European Commission, representing the European Union, also participated in the meeting, as did representatives of the European Investment Bank.
3. Representatives of the following Parties and organizations delivered pre-recorded video statements: Spain; Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (Ireland); the secretariat of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River; and the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
4. Representatives of Aarhus Centres were also present, as were representatives of international, regional and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of whom coordinated their input within the framework of the Aarhus ECO Forum.

I. Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda

5. The Chair of the Task Force, Ms. Loredana Dall'Ora (Italy), opened the meeting, stating that it aimed to provide a platform for more in-depth discussions on ensuring effective public participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in environmental decision-making, as well as effective public participation in decision-making in a transboundary context. The thematic focus of the meeting would be on decision-making on issues linked to agriculture and fishery, ocean, seas, marine resources, climate change and emerging technologies.
6. The Chair also highlighted the following background documents: Selected considerations, findings, and reports of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee relating to effective public participation (AC/TF.PP-11/Inf.2); Overview of the implementation of articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Aarhus Convention (AC/TF.PP-11/Inf.4) based on 2021 national implementation reports;² Survey for Parties to the Aarhus Convention, other interested UN Member States and stakeholders on the participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making;³ Synthesis report on the status of implementation of the Convention (ECE/MP.PP/2021/6); *The Aarhus Convention: An Implementation Guide – Second Edition*;⁴ and the *Maastricht Recommendations on Promoting Effective Public Participation in Decision-making in Environmental Matters* (Maastricht Recommendations).⁵
7. The Chair underlined the importance of the issues considered by the Task Force also in the global context, as effective public participation in decision-making in environmental matters supported the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets, in particular target 16.7.

¹ Documents for the eleventh meeting, as well as a list of participants, statements and presentations, are available at <https://unece.org/environmental-policy/events/eleventh-meeting-task-force-public-participation-decision-making>.

² Available at <https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention-reporting-mechanism/2021-reporting-cycle>.

³ See https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/TFPPDM-11_2_VulnerableGroups_PPDM-Survey-results.pdf

⁴ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.II.E.3.

⁵ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.II.E.7.

8. A representative of the European Environmental Bureau/Aarhus ECO Forum, in her opening statement, stressed the importance of ensuring effective and safe public participation under the Aarhus Convention, noting the increasing repression and criminalization of environmental defenders and the trend of fast-tracked decision-making in the name of the green transition.

9. The Task Force took note of the information provided by the Chair and adopted the agenda as set out in document AC/TF.PP-11/Inf.1. It also took note of the above-mentioned opening statement.

II. Participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making

10. The Chair introduced the agenda item on ensuring effective public participation in decision-making of persons and groups in vulnerable situations and introduced the panels of speakers.

11. The secretariat presented the results of a survey regarding participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making.⁶ Efforts to ensure their participation included legislative measures, policies and awareness-raising. Major barriers identified by the survey included limited resources, lack of awareness and lack of human capacity. To improve the engagement of vulnerable groups in decision-making, respondents suggested, for example, use of clear and culturally sensitive communication, relationship building, and adopting bottom-up participatory approaches. They also emphasized the importance of valuing contributions, ensuring transparency, creating safe spaces, empowerment, addressing biases, providing financial support, and offering capacity-building training for public authorities.

12. A representative of Child Rights International Network/University College Cork (Ireland) shared insights about engaging children in decision-making on environmental matters, using the example of citizens' assemblies involving children and youth. She highlighted that environmental and climate crises were also child rights crises and emphasized that children had the right to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their present and future. The speaker stated that, despite making up almost a third of the world's population, children remained one of the least-represented groups in the democratic process, with their demands often disregarded or insufficiently acted upon. The speaker noted that children were self-organizing, educating one another, and actively participating in grassroots environmental initiatives, strikes and protests. Recent examples of local and national citizens' assemblies involving children and youth had demonstrated the value of intergenerational participation. For example, in Scotland (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) 100 randomly selected children had participated in a parallel process to Scotland's Climate Assembly, which was taking place with randomly selected members of the adult population. The children's contributions positively impacted the adult Assembly members' deliberations, empowered the participating children, and enriched the legitimacy of the Assembly's recommendations by ensuring that the views of all generations were considered. The speaker stressed the need for child-friendly information and training for children on how to advocate for their rights. Intergenerational dialogues were emphasized as a decisive element in fostering learning, sharing and collaboration between children and adults.

13. Niamh and Conor (Ireland), two members of the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, highlighted the importance of children and young people's participation in citizens' assemblies. They reported how the 2022 Assembly in Ireland had brought together 35 randomly selected participants aged 7–17 years representing a cross-section of society and who had submitted 58 recommendations and calls to action to the Government of Ireland. The Assembly had demonstrated the potential of children's voices to influence national policies, with many recommendations reflected in the National Biodiversity Action Plan of Ireland. That process had empowered young participants: they

⁶ The results of the survey are available at https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/TFPPDM-11_2_VulnerableGroups_PPDM-Survey-results.pdf.

felt that their voices had been heard and that they had played an effective role in shaping their future. According to the speakers, challenges to the involvement of children and young people in decision-making include the stigma surrounding the perspectives of children, who were often dismissed as inexperienced, and limitations in their resources and opportunities. The need for assemblies to be relatable, inclusive and grounded in children's rights was emphasized so that children could actively engage in solutions to global crises. For the speakers, the experience had empowered participants and demonstrated the transformative potential of children's voices in shaping policy. One speaker described the Assembly as "fun, educational and eye-opening," emphasizing how it had increased his awareness of and commitment to environmental action. The speakers called for greater inclusion of children and young people in decision-making, including more assemblies globally, and the recognition that children's voices were key to creating lasting environmental solutions. Adults should provide the necessary resources to empower children and young people; recognizing their perspectives was a critical part of addressing global challenges and shaping a just and sustainable future.

14. A representative of Journalists for Human Rights/Aarhus ECO Forum shared insights on working with women environmental defenders in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, emphasizing their critical role in protecting communities, land and natural resources. Women environmental defenders had challenged environmental destruction and patriarchal power structures, while advocating for inclusion in decision-making processes at the local and national levels. In the Western Balkans, women had been central to grassroots movements opposing activities such as illegal logging, hydroelectric dams and mining, advocating for biodiversity preservation and sustainable development. Similarly, women environmental defenders in Türkiye confronted severe ecological threats from mining while combating gender-based violence, exclusion and limited legal protections. Those women often endured violence, harassment, legal challenges and economic instability but remained resilient in pushing for transparency, accountability and sustainable policies. Journalists for Human Rights supported women defenders by amplifying their voices through media training, advocacy tools and capacity-building, enabling them to engage in public discourse, influence policy, and collaborate with international networks. Stronger legal protections, more accessible resources and inclusion of women in decision-making processes to address environmental and gender inequities should be implemented. The speaker stressed that solidarity and empowerment were vital to fostering justice, sustainability and equality for women environmental defenders and their communities.

15. A representative of the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organizations and President of AGE Platform Europe gave a presentation on good practices and barriers for older persons participating in decision-making. She emphasized that participation was a fundamental right essential for everyone, especially those in vulnerable situations, in order to fully enjoy their human rights. Groups in vulnerable situations included persons with disabilities, older adults, migrants, refugees and others who faced barriers such as inaccessible information, physical and digital exclusion, and societal discrimination, including ageism and stigma based on identity or socioeconomic status. Challenges mentioned included a lack of awareness about decision-making opportunities, inaccessible facilities, the high costs of participation, and limited digital access, which risked creating new forms of exclusion. Social discrimination and negative stereotypes were highlighted as undermining self-confidence and trust in political processes, further hindering meaningful participation. The speaker explained that lessons learned demonstrated that diverse perspectives enhance decision-making by producing more transparent, targeted, accepted and legitimate outcomes. By way of an example of a good practice, the speaker referred to a survey conducted by HelpAge International that had strengthened the "answerability" of older people, highlighting the importance of equipping persons and groups in vulnerable situations with the skills and confidence to engage. Physical, social and digital barriers should be removed, discrimination combated, and public institutions should ensure inclusivity. Public organizations should provide accessible environments and empower all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, thereby fostering equity and inclusivity in public life.

16. A representative of Serbia gave a presentation about children's engagement in the development of the new Environmental Protection Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for

2024 to 2033. The Strategy aligned with the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and aimed to promote sustainable development, pollution reduction, carbon neutrality and natural resource protection. Supported by partners such as Sweden, Switzerland, the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the preparation process for the Strategy was widely participative and involved a working group representing different stakeholders. Bilateral meetings, workshops and public consultations were planned. The key horizontal issues addressed by the Strategy included raising awareness about environmental issues, building capacity for participation in decision-making processes on environmental issues, and integrating gender and anti-discrimination perspectives. Attention had been given to issues affecting vulnerable social groups, especially children's health and well-being through initiatives such as air and water quality monitoring, addressing chemical impacts, and promoting education on sustainable practices. The speaker emphasized the efforts of Serbia to include civil society and NGOs, highlighting a transparent parallel process for public engagement, and stating that contributions to the Strategy are open for public input.

17. A representative of the European Investment Bank presented the institution's Environmental and Social Standards, particularly Standards 2 (Stakeholder Engagement) and 7 (Vulnerable Groups, Indigenous Peoples and Gender). Standard 2 promoted an inclusive, transparent and systematic approach to engaging stakeholders constructively, emphasizing that engagement must be rendered meaningful by being gender-responsive, inclusive of affected communities and accessible to groups in vulnerable situations. Engagement should involve the provision of prior information in a suitable language, format and manner; be free of cost and coercion; be transparent, and allow for the raising of grievances through a dedicated mechanism. Standard 7 recognized the additional barriers faced by groups in vulnerable situations, acknowledging that such barriers limited those groups' opportunity or ability to equally participate in decision-making. Thus, project promoters should assess, manage and monitor project risks and opportunities related to Indigenous Peoples and groups in vulnerable situations. The Nepal Power System Expansion Project was presented as an example of effective stakeholder engagement. Simple language and vinyl posters had been used to explain risks and measures in remote, low-literacy areas. That approach had ensured transparency, inclusivity and positive engagement. The speaker concluded by underscoring that effective stakeholder engagement, adherence to European Investment Bank Environmental and Social Standards and respect for the rights and well-being of local communities were crucial for the success of projects.

18. Several representatives of the Aarhus ECO Forum made statements.

19. The Task Force:

(a) Thanked the presenters and took note of the insights, examples, good practices, experiences and challenges shared by the representatives of AGE Platform Europe, Child Rights International Network/University College Cork (Ireland), Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (Ireland), European Investment Bank, Journalists for Human Rights/Aarhus ECO Forum and Serbia;

(b) Encouraged sharing information, experiences, challenges and good practices with regard to public participation in decision-making through the Aarhus Clearinghouse and its good practice database, and requested the secretariat to upload the case studies shared through the survey to the Aarhus Clearinghouse;

(c) Reiterated the call to carry out capacity-building activities, such as training sessions for public authorities, NGOs and other target groups, to overcome barriers and promote good practices to strengthen the participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making;

(d) Took note of the:

(i) Survey results on participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making, the systemic barriers to engaging those groups and also the types of efforts made and the communication channels used by public authorities and organizations to strengthen engagement with them. Moreover, a number of suggestions were identified to enhance the participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making;

(ii) Suggestion by the Aarhus ECO Forum to strengthen youth representation in processes under the Aarhus Convention, including through a possible institutionalization of said representation (e.g., youth council);

(iii) Subsequent Task Force discussion in relation to agenda item 2, including the highlighted good practices, challenges and suggestions for improvements and for the way forward, including the following:

- Effective inclusion of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making – including women, children and youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized communities – is essential for the development of policies, plans, programmes and legislation related to the environment. Ensuring that the voices of such persons/groups are heard leads to more responsive, legitimate and sustainable outcomes, thus making the above-mentioned instruments more inclusive and effective;
- Current challenges to effective participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations include systemic barriers such as limited resources (e.g., funding, time and personnel issues affecting the organizers of a given public participation procedure), limited awareness, lack of human capacity (e.g., appropriately trained personnel) and inadequate communication;
- Many persons or groups in vulnerable situations face a lack of access to timely and comprehensible information, language and accessibility issues, and are excluded by digital divides. Additionally, certain groups face unique obstacles. Women might encounter patriarchal structures, legal constraints or physical and psychological threats, including harassment. While children and youth often lack platforms for their perspectives and are dismissed due to their age. Older persons and persons with disabilities might require tailored outreach strategies to address physical or informational challenges. Without dedicated measures to address the above-mentioned barriers, the participation of the persons/groups concerned remains limited and their interests underrepresented;
- Experience had shown that accessible information, training and capacity-building efforts could empower persons or groups in vulnerable situations to engage meaningfully. Tools such as posters, assemblies, community-driven inquiry and multigenerational dialogues had proven effective. Such inclusive decision-making not only improved policy quality but also strengthened trust, legitimacy and social cohesion;

(e) Encouraged Parties, other interested States and stakeholders to use the Maastricht Recommendations as a blueprint for the development of inclusive engagement guidelines, across all relevant decision-making processes, to ensure effective participation of persons and groups in vulnerable situations in decision-making. In that regard, the Task Force took note of a suggestion by a representative of the Aarhus ECO Forum to develop recommendations under the Aarhus Convention on that subject to supplement the Maastricht Recommendations;

(f) Encouraged Parties to establish formal mechanisms (e.g., youth assemblies, advisory councils for older persons) to ensure that underrepresented groups could shape decisions that affect them;

(g) Encouraged Parties, other interested States and stakeholders to develop and allocate resources for training, capacity-building and support for persons and groups in vulnerable situations to enhance their participation and advocacy skills.

III. Public participation in decision-making in a transboundary context

20. The Chair introduced the next agenda item, on good practices, challenges and opportunities for public participation in a transboundary context.

21. A representative of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River discussed the importance of public participation in transboundary decision-making, highlighting initiatives that engaged diverse audiences and inspired shared responsibility for environmental protection – among both youth and older persons – such as Danube Day, the Danube Art Master competition, and including all stakeholders in management plan updates. She emphasized the role of the Joint Danube Surveys –the fifth and latest edition of which was currently underway – in monitoring the Danube River’s health and the use of citizen science for public engagement. Challenges included limited awareness, technical barriers, and public apathy, which were addressed through simplified communication, visual storytelling and targeting of underrepresented groups. Finding successful tools was a balancing act that involved online questionnaires and social media campaigns, as well as simplifying communication through visuals, relatable storytelling and materials tailored to underrepresented groups. The International Commission’s efforts aimed to empower the public, especially youth, to shape decisions that had an impact on their lives. Digital platforms should be used to encourage multilevel participation and to empower communities and a wide range of stakeholders. Good communication could further foster meaningful, inclusive and impactful public participation.

22. A representative of Independent Ecological Expertise/Aarhus ECO Forum shared experiences on public participation procedures in environmental decision-making, focusing on international projects under the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) in Kyrgyzstan. The speaker highlighted the country’s broader efforts to strengthen environmental policy and public engagement. Kyrgyzstan had won the 2021 Future Policy Award for its successful policies on public awareness, particularly regarding environmental health. Key projects included a transboundary environmental impact assessment for a copper and gold mine near the border with Kazakhstan and the cancellation of a road project following an environmental impact assessment and cross-border discussions, demonstrating the impact of meaningful public participation. The speaker noted challenges related to a recently introduced law on NGOs, which had imposed significant reporting burdens on NGOs, potentially restricting public participation and consultation processes. The new regulations granted public authorities the right to request and inspect internal documents, to participate in NGOs’ internal activities, and to decide whether NGOs’ activities aligned with their founding objectives.

23. Representatives of Kyrgyzstan and of Aarhus ECO Forum made statements.

24. The Task Force:

(a) Thanked presenters and took note of the insights, examples, good practices, experiences and challenges shared by the representatives of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River and Independent Ecological Expertise/Aarhus ECO Forum;

(b) Took note of the subsequent Task Force discussion in relation to agenda item 3, including the highlighted achievements, good practices, challenges and suggestions for improvements and for the way forward, including the following:

(i) Public participation in a transboundary context was complicated by differing legal frameworks, languages and practices depending on cultural context. Ensuring effective transboundary public participation processes involved harmonizing procedures, overcoming language barriers, and raising awareness of the public’s right to be involved. Without effective notification mechanisms, communities in affected neighbouring States might not even be aware of the existence of opportunities to participate;

(ii) Challenges included limited technical and financial resources, especially in countries with fewer institutional capacities. The variability in national laws and

procedures might create inconsistencies and give rise to a lack of clarity, while digital divides could further restrict the role of NGOs in facilitating inclusive participation. Overcoming those obstacles require proactive, multilingual communication strategies, resource sharing and supportive legal frameworks;

(iii) Lessons learned emphasized the importance of visual and narrative storytelling, targeted outreach and inclusive communication on complex topics. Engaging youth, leveraging digital tools, and employing observers as intermediaries between the public, the private sector and Governments helped bridge gaps. Trust could be built through consistent, transparent processes and efforts to ensure accessibility and empowerment, even across borders;

(iv) One issue that had an impact on public participation in general, including in a transboundary context, was the adoption of “Foreign agent laws” by some countries in the region, which established burdensome requirements for NGOs that hindered their ability to operate. Such new laws granted State bodies the right to: check NGOs’ internal affairs and increase their reporting obligations; request and inspect internal documents; participate in NGOs internal activities; and decide whether NGOs’ activities aligned with their founding objectives;

(c) Encouraged Parties to harmonize transboundary public participation procedures through bilateral agreements, ensuring timely notification, the provision of multilingual materials and culturally sensitive outreach strategies;

(d) Called on Parties to invest in digital platforms that are accessible, inclusive and widely disseminated to enable cross-border engagement while considering varying levels of digital access.

IV. Public participation in decision-making on agriculture and fishery

25. The Chair introduced the fourth panel of speakers, opening the discussion on public participation in decision-making on agriculture- and fishery-related issues.

26. A representative of Georgia shared insights about public participation practices and national legislation concerning public involvement in agricultural activities. The speaker highlighted the main domestic legislation on public participation and public consultation, particularly in the agricultural sector. The speaker referred to a measure (resolution) obliging responsible institutions to identify all stakeholders and interested parties, to provide all information at an early stage, and to conduct consultations in person through public hearings and also electronically. Furthermore, the speaker mentioned a civic committee comprising 37 civil society organizations and NGOs, which aimed to strengthen cooperation with the civil sector and promote good planning and implementation of agricultural and rural development policies. Challenges presented included a lack of public awareness of and interest in participation, as well as a lack of specific knowledge. To address those issues, teachers were trained, scholarships were provided, and innovative outreach initiatives, such as youth agricultural schools and agricultural Olympiads, were run. Lastly, the speaker emphasized that inclusive participation was essential, including for groups in vulnerable situations such as prisoners, whose participation in agricultural projects demonstrated the potential for broad stakeholder involvement.

27. A representative of Guinea-Bissau gave a presentation on public participation in a five-year plan for artisanal fishing on the Buba River, an important activity in terms of the country’s economy, food security and poverty alleviation, as well as being the primary income source for many citizens. The speaker described an increase in pressure on fishery resources in recent years due to a rise in the number of fishing licences, the use of harmful fishing techniques, and an increase in the number of fishers, which made a sustainable management plan for the Buba River necessary. The five-year plan integrated preventive measures, community engagement and scientific and empirical data to ensure sustainable development. Challenges included institutional instability, limited access to information, a lack of technical and scientific knowledge, economic and social difficulties and insufficient

infrastructure such as roads, electricity and water in isolated areas. As lessons learned, the importance of inclusive, participative, shared and local governance was underlined. Fishers, women fish processors, sellers, traditional authorities, NGOs and the Ministry of Fisheries played active roles in consultations. Shared local governance could empower communities as agents of change, fostering co-management and solutions rooted in local customs.

28. A representative of Guta Environmental Law Association/Protect the Future/Aarhus ECO Forum discussed meaningful participation in the context of the revision of the European Union Common Agricultural Policy. Emphasizing the need for robust consultation and transparency, the speaker described public engagement as being critical in shaping policies with far-reaching environmental impacts; a point demonstrated by the Common Agricultural Policy's focus on sustainable agriculture, ecosystem health and climate obligations. According to the speaker, however, the fast-tracked process of revision of the Policy (completed in just six weeks) raised concerns about the bypassing of meaningful participation, with limited consultation. Key challenges presented included accelerated legislative processes and political urgency undermining participatory rights, limited representation of diverse stakeholders, and the potential for increased environmental pressures due to weakened sustainability provisions. Effective frameworks should consider input from scientists, NGOs and communities to ensure that policies aligned with environmental and social goals. Long-term sustainability demanded targeted incentives, transparent governance and mechanisms to evaluate public input. Misuse of fast-tracked procedures should be combated, participatory rights prioritized, and case studies leveraged to address governance challenges. Governments should broaden stakeholder engagement, enhance public consultation processes, and strengthen transparency to safeguard environmental and societal well-being.

29. The Task Force:

(a) Thanked presenters and took note of the insights, good practices, experiences, challenges and suggestions for improvements and for the way forward shared by the representatives of Georgia, Guinea-Bissau and Guta Environmental Law Association/Protect the Future/Aarhus ECO Forum, including the following:

(i) Public participation in agricultural and fishery management could be hindered by various factors, such as low levels of awareness, fast track procedures, limited technical knowledge and insufficient infrastructure. In fishery, the complexity of resource management – ranging from economic difficulties to the scarcity of accessible scientific information – could further complicate meaningful engagement with local communities and stakeholders;

(ii) Successful examples showed that efforts to involve all relevant stakeholders (e.g., fishers, women fish processors, local authorities, NGOs and government representatives) support shared governance and foster trust. When communities actively engage in identifying challenges and co-creating solutions, resource management becomes more sustainable and better aligned with their needs and realities;

(iii) Inclusive negotiation and consultation processes could lead to ecosystem-based management approaches, improved food security and enhanced livelihoods. Participation ensures that local knowledge informs policy, and community-driven monitoring leads to more enduring and equitable outcomes. Empowering communities as agents of change lay the groundwork for effective governance and resource sustainability;

(b) Called on Parties to establish inclusive public participation frameworks involving all stakeholders in decision-making processes on agriculture and fishery;

(c) Also called on Parties, stakeholders and partner organizations to provide training and accessible information to local communities to increase their technical and scientific understanding, thereby strengthening their voices in resource management;

(d) Further called on Parties to ensure that feedback and transparent reporting mechanisms are set up that highlight how public input contributed to final decisions.

V. Public participation in decision-making on oceans, seas and marine resources

30. The Chair introduced the topic of public participation in decision-making on oceans, seas and marine resources, including good practices, challenges and opportunities in that regard, and introduced the fifth panel of speakers.

31. A representative of Spain shared insights about participatory processes to involve society in the conservation of marine protected areas based on the LIFE INTEMARES project (integrated, innovative and participative management of the Natura 2000 Network in the Spanish marine environment). He stated that the LIFE INTEMARES project, part of the European Union LIFE funding programme, supported the Spanish Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge in establishing a well-managed network of marine Natura 2000 Network areas. The project was based on active stakeholder participation and integrated science, conservation, monitoring, governance, capacity-building and communication to achieve domestic biodiversity goals, including the goal of protecting 30 per cent of marine territory by 2030. Key achievements included the fostering of cross-sectoral collaboration, with over 40 participatory processes involving 15,000 individuals and 1,000 organizations. The project had promoted the importance of transparency and inclusivity through core working groups, thematic workshops and sectoral meetings to balance human activities with conservation goals. Lastly, the speaker emphasized the value of structured participation, supported by a guide to participatory processes, ensuring informed and inclusive decision-making aligned with the Spanish legal framework.

32. A representative of the NGO Heirs To Our Ocean gave a presentation about the Youth Advisory Council and youth participation in the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (Ocean Decade) in the United States of America. She stated that the Youth Action Council under the Ocean Decade was an example of meaningful youth participation that fostered empathetic leadership and collective organizing to advocate for justice-orientated solutions. Youth Advisory Council members had collaborated with their respective national committees for the Ocean Decade, contributed to documentation, advocated for policy reforms, and developed critical skills including leadership, problem-solving and policy advocacy. The speaker highlighted challenges such as navigating political and institutional barriers, particularly in countries with restrictive political contexts for climate action. States should secure resources, for example, funding, mentorship and travel support. Robust organizational and institutional backing, including strong messages from the higher political levels and the Decade Coordination Unit, were highlighted as essential in amplifying youth voices and fostering multigenerational collaboration.

33. Several representatives of the Aarhus ECO Forum made statements.

34. The Task Force:

(a) Thanked presenters and took note of the insights, examples, good practices, experiences and challenges shared by the representatives of Spain and NGO Heirs to Our Ocean/Aarhus ECO Forum;

(b) Took note of the subsequent Task Force discussion in relation to agenda item 5, including the highlighted achievements, good practices, challenges and suggestions for improvements and for the way forward, including the following:

(i) Youth Action Councils and other participatory frameworks had emerged as promising tools to involve younger generations and diverse stakeholders in marine conservation. By organizing councils, training sessions and community-based solutions, those frameworks inspired future leaders and ensured that a broad spectrum of interests – from commercial fisheries to transportation – informed marine policy;

(ii) Efforts such as the LIFE INTERMARE project in Spain showed that participation thrived on long-term trust-building, inclusive processes and multiple stakeholder involvement. Such methods built relationships and confidence, proving that consistent and structured participatory approaches yielded sustainable marine conservation outcomes;

(iii) Engagement tools range from core working groups, workshops and sector-specific meetings to structured participatory methodology, which could be implemented with a guide to participatory processes, ensuring transparency and inclusivity; Parties were encouraged to use the Maastricht Recommendations as a basis for developing such guides adapted to the needs of different target groups;

(c) Encouraged Parties and other interested States to:

(i) Establish Youth Action Councils and other multi-stakeholder platforms, which ensure that children, youth and other stakeholders could effectively participate in decision-making;

(ii) Invest in sustained, long-term participatory frameworks and training programmes to foster trust, capacity and confidence among diverse stakeholder groups.

VI. Public participation in decision-making on climate change

35. The Chair introduced the topic of public participation in decision-making on climate change and presented the sixth panel of speakers.

36. A representative of the secretariat of UNFCCC discussed the importance of public participation in decision-making under UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement. She highlighted article 12 of the Paris Agreement, which focused on climate education, public awareness and participation. The Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment aimed to elaborate on those elements, focusing on building capacity and fostering peer-to-peer learning. The speaker highlighted examples of best practices, including organizing participatory consultations during the development, implementation and evaluation of Nationally Determined Contributions, and establishing institutional platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue to mobilize society and promote inclusive policymaking. The speaker also stated that choices and actions taken individually and collectively could achieve the unprecedented changes that were needed in order to co-exist with climate change and avoid its worst consequences. Key practices included inclusive consultations, ongoing stakeholder engagement, institutional arrangements, community-led actions and the involvement of groups in vulnerable situations. Presented challenges included the urgency, scale, and complexity, necessitating effective public participation in decision-making processes. Effective and inclusive methods of public participation, as well as ensuring public access to information and raising awareness were emphasized as crucial in a phase of decisions on just transitions that required both the insights of various individuals and groups of people, as well as public support for difficult decisions.

37. A representative of Switzerland shared insights about public participation in the country, highlighting the recent adoption of the Climate and Innovation Act. According to the speaker, the Act sets interim greenhouse gas reduction targets for key sectors and allocated CHF 3.2 billion to encourage the use of climate-friendly heating systems and innovative technologies, aiming for climate neutrality by 2050. The Act had arisen from a popular initiative, demonstrating the commitment of Switzerland to direct democracy. Public participation had occurred at multiple stages, starting with the launching of a federal popular initiative proposing amendments, followed by a public consultation on a counterproposal that had incorporated key concerns. Said consultation had given rise to 143 statements, reflecting a high level of engagement. The speaker highlighted that the Act had been put to the popular vote and had passed with majority support. Regarding the recent process of evaluation of the Act, the speaker underlined the challenge of managing the large volume of public inputs, with nearly 1,200 statements received. Switzerland was addressing that challenge by digitalizing consultation procedures to streamline submissions and analysis. The process surrounding the adoption of the Act exemplified how participatory processes could build public understanding and acceptance of climate policies.

38. A representative of the Aarhus Centre Turkmenistan shared insights on public participation in climate change-related matters in Turkmenistan. He highlighted the crucial role of Aarhus Centres as platforms for engaging the public in climate-related decision-

making. The speaker stated that Aarhus Centres collaborated closely with public authorities and offered recommendations for national programmes, plans and draft laws, particularly in the context of climate change. It was further noted that public participation was becoming an essential component of addressing climate change in Turkmenistan. That approach had fostered trust between the public and authorities, improved the quality of State-public interactions and enhanced the effectiveness of decisions. In the speaker's view, challenges persisted, but the benefits reaped demonstrated the importance of continued progress. Turkmenistan planned to develop permanent mechanisms for NGO-Government interaction, provide funding for public initiatives, and establish regular monitoring and evaluation of public participation processes to ensure continuous improvement and inclusivity.

39. A representative of the European Environmental Bureau/Aarhus ECO Forum discussed public participation in the context of the European Union National Energy and Climate Plans Regulation.⁷ She stated that National Energy and Climate Plans were integral to the European Union energy and climate strategy and aimed to set out how member States addressed energy efficiency, decarbonization, energy security, internal energy markets and research and innovation. Despite the critical role of the Plans in achieving climate and energy goals and addressing energy poverty, according to the speaker, most member States had failed to conduct meaningful public consultations during the revision process. Public consultation sections in many draft Plans were minimal, often conflating stakeholder engagement with broader public involvement. Only a few Plans outlined how public input had been aggregated or incorporated into decision-making. However, regarding Slovenia and Lithuania, the representative emphasized their transparent practices, including surveys, feedback mechanisms and alternative policy measures informed by public contributions. The speaker highlighted that effective public participation fostered ownership. Member States should strengthen their consultation frameworks, ensure transparency, and prioritize inclusive, accessible public engagement to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of National Energy and Climate Plans.

40. Several representatives of the Aarhus ECO Forum made statements.

41. The Task Force:

(a) Thanked presenters and took note of the experiences shared by the representatives of Switzerland, the secretariat of UNFCCC, Aarhus Centre Turkmenistan and the European Environmental Bureau/Aarhus ECO Forum;

(b) Took note of the subsequent Task Force discussion in relation to agenda item 6, including the highlighted achievements, examples, good practices, challenges and suggestions for improvements and for the way forward, including the following:

(i) Public participation was integral to the success of global climate action frameworks, including the Paris Agreement. By involving the public in creating, reviewing and implementing Nationally Determined Contributions and National Energy and Climate Plans, Governments could ensure solutions that reflect the priorities of the public and foster ownership, credibility and long-term commitment;

(ii) It seemed that many countries had yet to fully embrace robust consultation processes in their climate planning, to bridge gaps in transparency and legitimacy. NGOs and Aarhus Centres could contribute to bridging said gaps by enabling informed, accessible and continuous engagement with members of the public, including persons and groups in vulnerable situations. Such an approach would drive not only environmental resilience but also social justice and equity;

⁷ Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2018 on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action, amending Regulations (EC) No 663/2009 and (EC) No 715/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council, Directives 94/22/EC, 98/70/EC, 2009/31/EC, 2009/73/EC, 2010/31/EU, 2012/27/EU and 2013/30/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, Council Directives 2009/119/EC and (EU) 2015/652 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 525/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 328/1 (2018), pp. 1–77.

(iii) Examples shared demonstrated that inclusive institutional arrangements (through, e.g., commissions, committees) and ongoing stakeholder dialogues could raise public awareness, and integrate diverse voices, including of youth, women and older persons, into climate strategies;

(iv) The direct democracy example shared by Switzerland demonstrated how the public had been involved at many relevant stages in the development of the Climate and Innovation Act, starting with a popular initiative, followed by public consultations and informative events, a referendum, and lastly, a popular vote. At the same time, it illustrated the need for digital solutions to consultation processes to facilitate a large number of submissions and their efficient analysis and hence to avoid delay in advancing legislative procedures;

(c) Called on Parties to promote effective public participation in developing and revising Nationally Determined Contributions and National Energy and Climate Plans, and to ensure transparency on how public inputs were integrated into reports. The Aarhus Convention and the Maastricht Recommendations provide, respectively, a solid legal framework and a practical tool to ensure inclusive and effective public participation.

VII. Public participation in decision-making on emerging technologies

42. The Chair introduced the next agenda item on public participation in decision-making in the context of emerging technologies, highlighting that the topic was rather unexplored under the Aarhus Convention and was an important one that should be discussed. Emerging technologies included, for example, artificial intelligence, blockchain and quantum technologies, which were often developed by the private sector and advancing at an unprecedented pace, often outpacing the ability of Governments to keep up through their regulatory frameworks. Despite the profound implications of emerging technologies for societies and the environment, public participation procedures were largely absent, raising questions about transparency and accountability.

43. A representative of European Environmental Bureau/Aarhus ECO Forum, speaking on behalf of Environmental Justice Network of Ireland, gave a presentation on how emerging technologies could both support and undermine public participation rights. She highlighted both the opportunities and challenges posed by digital innovations in environmental decision-making. Technologies such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, cloud computing and the Internet of things could offer transformative potential to enhance public participation processes. Artificial intelligence, for example, could assist the public in understanding complex environmental reports, while blockchain could enhance transparency by verifying participants' identities and preventing conflicts of interest from arising. Additionally, those technologies could alleviate administrative burdens, address accessibility issues, and provide low-cost capacity-building tools. However, the speaker noted significant barriers, particularly for marginalized groups who might lack the necessary Internet bandwidth, devices or digital literacy to engage with such systems. The speaker also highlighted risks associated with relying on private corporations to develop and manage public service technologies, potentially concentrating control over democratic mechanisms in corporate hands. Furthermore, the environmental impacts of those technologies, including e-waste and resource consumption, were cited as pressing concerns. The speaker concluded by stating that emerging technologies should be designed inclusively from the outset, ensuring accessibility and environmental sustainability. Developments should align with human rights frameworks and prioritize a human value-centric approach. Increased research and funding were recommended to better integrate such technologies into public participation processes, supporting good environmental governance.

44. Representatives of the European Union, the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organizations and the Aarhus ECO Forum made statements.

45. The Task Force:

(a) Thanked the presenter and took note of the experience shared by the representative of European Environmental Bureau/Aarhus ECO Forum on behalf of Environmental Justice Network of Ireland;

(b) Took note of the subsequent Task Force discussion in relation to agenda item 7, including the highlighted achievements, challenges and suggestions for improvements and for the way forward, including the following:

(i) Not much experience had been identified with regard to public participation in decision-making on emerging technologies;

(ii) Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, blockchain and the Internet of things, offered innovative avenues to broaden and simplify public participation. They could streamline information analysis, verify participants' identities, and potentially address accessibility issues if deployed responsibly. Such tools might foster more inclusive and transparent decision-making processes, allowing stakeholders to better understand complex environmental data;

(iii) Significant challenges remained. Digital divides, language barriers and limited technical literacy could exclude persons and groups in vulnerable situations. The privatization of digital infrastructures for public engagement also risks shifting control of democratic processes to corporate entities, while the environmental footprint of emerging technologies must be considered to avoid exacerbating resource depletion and climate impacts;

(iv) Blockchain and other distributed technologies showed promise in terms of verifying the identity of participants, ensuring data integrity, and incentivizing engagement. Yet those tools must be integrated thoughtfully, respecting human rights and prioritizing environmental sustainability. Building equitable digital frameworks requires early stage inclusive design and a strong ethical and legal architecture;

(c) Encouraged Parties to invest in research and pilot projects that apply emerging technologies ethically and sustainably, ensuring that they serve the public interest and uphold human rights standards;

(d) Encouraged Parties, other interested States and stakeholders to incorporate environmental sustainability criteria and accountability measures into the procurement, development and operation of technology-driven participation tools;

(e) Took note of the suggestion by a representative of the Aarhus ECO Forum to consider the topic under the Task Force in the next intersessional period.

VIII. Other relevant developments

46. The Chair opened the floor for discussions of other relevant developments not addressed under previous agenda items

47. The Task Force took note of the statement by a representative of the Aarhus ECO Forum with regard to limitations for public hearings introduced recently in Hungary.

IX. Closing of the meeting

48. The Task Force thanked the speakers for their useful presentations and interventions and the participants for their important contributions, as well as the interpreters and the secretariat for their support, and noted that the agreed outcomes summarized by the Chair at the meeting would be circulated via email after the meeting and incorporated into the meeting report, along with a more detailed account of presentations and of the discussion.