



WES PRESS RELEASE

Effective environmental information and participation: Efforts for promoting the Aarhus Convention in the Mediterranean

Athens, 23 March 2023

Numerous Multilateral Environmental Conventions and National Legislation are important for the protection of the Environment and their successful implementation greatly rely on evidence-based easily accessible information, effective public participation and access of all interested stakeholders to justice. These three essential components are furthered by the Aarhus Convention¹.

The 8th and 9th of March 2023 marked a major milestone in the long-standing joint efforts to promote the Aarhus Convention in the whole of the Mediterranean. Together with the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat, the Secretariat of the UNEP/MAP Barcelona Convention, the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean, the Energy, Environment and Water Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM), the Circle of Mediterranean Parliamentarians for Sustainable Development (COMPSUD) and the Mediterranean Programme for International Environmental Law and Negotiation (MEPIELAN Centre), the EU funded “Water and Environment Support (WES) in the ENI Neighbourhood South Region” project, during a 2-day on-line meeting, launched a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) exchange that will last for at least one year, in order to support Mediterranean States that are interested in acceding to the Aarhus Convention, to be able to do so in a smooth and effective manner.

Currently, 12 Mediterranean countries and the European Union are already Parties to the Aarhus Convention. By securing effective access to information and to justice, as well as engagement of the public, accession to the Convention, will facilitate the design and implementation of green economy programmes, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its Sustainable Development Goals, the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) of the UNEP/MAP-Barcelona Convention system, the Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development, the Union for the Mediterranean’s 2030 GreenerMed Agenda, the compliance with, and enforcement of, the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols and a series of national strategies and policies. Being a Party to the Convention significantly contributes to countries’ efforts to promote citizen-centric environmental governance and environmentally sound policies.

The Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD 2016-2025), whose follow-up is ensured by the Mediterranean Commission of Sustainable Development (MCSD), encourages all Mediterranean countries to accede to the Aarhus Convention and includes and promotes a relevant flagship initiative. Similarly, the Union for the Mediterranean works toward the reinforcement of mechanisms for stakeholder’s

¹ UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention)



Water and Environment Support

in the ENI Southern Neighbourhood region

participation and engagement. Many Mediterranean governments are inspired by the Aarhus Convention in trying to improve environmental governance and mobilize citizens organizations in becoming constructive allies in dealing with the accumulated environmental and sustainability problems.

The meeting was facilitated by the WES Team Leader Prof. Michael Scoullas who stressed that “WES promotes the uninhibited sharing of environmental information and effective public participation in environmental issues. The participation of some 37 Peers from Ministries of Environment, Foreign Affairs, Justice, as well as the active participation of NGOs, indicates that the countries of the region are genuinely interested in understanding better the benefits, opportunities and challenges linked with the accession to the Aarhus Convention. So, the meeting and P2P process is riding on this momentum that has been a long time in the making and its timing is right”.

Ms Fiona Marshall, Legal Officer at the Aarhus Convention secretariat, confirmed that the countries of the Mediterranean region that are not members of the UNECE are very welcome to join the Convention. This call was repeatedly made by the Convention’s Parties. She stated that the framework offered by the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on Pollution Release and Transfer Registers (Protocol on PRTRs) will help the Mediterranean region to further enhance democratic institutions and to improve environmental decision-making with concrete results for the benefit of people and the environment.

On behalf of the Mediterranean Action Plan – Barcelona Convention Secretariat (UNEP/MAP), Mr. Ilias Mavroeidis, Programme Management Officer – Governance, reiterated how important this WES activity is in the implementation of the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) in which the adoption and implementation of the Aarhus Convention is included and implemented as a flagship initiative. The target, which shows the vision of the Strategy on this important issue, is the accession of two thirds of the Mediterranean countries to the Aarhus Convention by 2025.

Ms Alessandra Sensi, Head of Sector - Environment, Green and Blue Economy, of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as an intergovernmental organization of 43 countries with a structure built around a participatory approach, is fully committed to further strengthen the principles of the Aarhus Convention in the region.

The meeting also validated the [“Foundation Discussion Document \(FDD\) for the Mediterranean Accession Agenda to the Aarhus Convention” \(discussion paper\) and its Summary for Decision Makers](#)” which was co-authored and presented by Prof. Evangelos Raftopoulos, Director of MEPIELAN Centre. The FDD unveils and evaluates the insights, benefits, opportunities and challenges for the Mediterranean States acceding to the Aarhus Convention.

The second day of the meeting was opened with an intervention by HE Mr. Bruno Coimbra, Member of the Parliament of Portugal and Chairman of the Energy, Environment and Water Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM), during which he stated that the Mediterranean



Water and Environment Support

in the ENI Southern Neighbourhood region

countries share common challenges and goals when addressing environmental issues, climate change, the energy transition, and management of natural resources, and access to reliable information is crucial to deal with these challenges. He also informed that one of the recommendations of his Committee to the next plenary session of the PA-UfM in May 2023, is a call for all Mediterranean countries to ratify the Aarhus Convention.

The focus of the rest of the second day was mainly on the experiences of Mediterranean countries that are Parties to the Aarhus Convention, as well as from the NGO community.

Ms Edlira Dersha, Statistics Officer at the Ministry of Tourism and Environment of Albania, gave a concise overview of the implementation of the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention in Albania, including the challenges faced.

The Italian Charter of Principles for Transparency and Participation in Environmental Assessments, a decalogue of decision-supporting principles, was presented by Ms Margherita Cudemo of the Directorate General for Environmental Assessments at the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security of Italy.

The user-friendly PARTICIPAT.PT was presented by Ms Maria Margarida Marcelino, the National Focal Point to the Aarhus Convention, from the Environment Public Participation Unit of the Portuguese Environment Agency. The portal was created in 2015 to achieve greater citizen involvement in public participation processes, including in decision-making regarding environmental issues.

Ms Teresa Palomar Nieto, Head of Service- Civil Servant at the Spanish Ministry for Technological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, and Mr Íñigo de Vicente-Mingarro, Manager PRTR-España/Expert T.A. to the same Ministry and Chair of the International PRTR Coordinating Group, presented the Spanish experience in implementing the UNECE Protocol on PRTRs and walked the participants through how PRTR-España works. The presentations were closed by Ms Olya Melen-Zabramna, Head of Legal Unit at the Ukrainian NGO Environment-People-Law, representing the European ECO-Forum. She highlighted the role of the Convention as an international tool for public rights with unprecedented access of civil society to documents and to expert and decision-making meetings of the Convention's different bodies and with public involvement in negotiations. She also showcased a successful example of public participation in decision-making on a project in Ukraine.

Apart from the Peer support process, and complementing it, WES will be developing a "Mediterranean Accession Agenda" to guide and facilitate the process and organising a 2-3 day training in Athens, Greece, in the second part of 2023.

In their closing remarks, Ms Ella Behlyarova, Secretary to the UNECE's Aarhus Convention, reiterated the Secretariat's willingness to provide advisory assistance in law development and practical implementation of the Convention, as well as support participation of interested countries' representatives in the Convention's meetings so as to facilitate accession processes, and Prof. Michael Scoullou presented the next steps in the P2P process and expressed his optimism that by the end of the 1-year WES activity, Mediterranean countries will be closer to acceding to the Aarhus Convention.



Water and Environment Support

in the ENI Southern Neighbourhood region

For more information, please contact:

Lisa Papadogeorgaki, WES Key Expert Communication and networking

lpa@ldk.gr

Meanwhile, stay updated via:

WES Web site

WES Facebook page

WES Twitter page

WES LinkedIn page

WES YouTube page

WES

The Water and Environment Support project in the Southern Mediterranean Neighbourhood aims to protecting the environment and improving the management of scarce water resources in the Mediterranean region. It will tackle problems related to pollution prevention and water use efficiency. WES is a regional project with emphasis on the countries of North Africa and the Middle East (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia).

Disclaimer

This press release was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the WES Project and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.