

THEMATIC WORKSHOP ON SYNERGIES FOR CAPACITY BUILDING UNDER INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS ADDRESSING CHEMICALS AND WASTE MANAGEMENT

30 March – 2 April 2004

Opening Remarks of Mr. Jeremy Wates, Executive Secretary, Aarhus Convention,
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to join with colleagues from the other international organizations in welcoming you here today.

Synergies and capacity-building are both "buzzwords" in the world of MEAs and they need to be. The process of adopting new environmental agreements to meet newly emerging needs should certainly not stop, but it needs to be matched with efforts to implement those agreements already in place. Capacity building is crucial in this regard. And it is equally crucial that the bodies responsible for the various international agreements explore possibilities for co-operation and for exploiting synergies.

UNECE is involved in chemicals-related issues in various ways. For example, it provides the secretariat for the Globally harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals, and for the Convention on Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents. However, the particular element which we would like to bring to the table at this workshop relates to the Aarhus Convention.

The Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters is not an obvious partner of the chemicals and waste conventions. The Aarhus Convention is a procedural, cross-cutting MEA and in this way covers the chemicals and waste conventions. The Convention is based on three pillars: access to information, access to public participation in decision-making and access to justice.

Access to information means the public authority is required to respond to information requests, which involves collecting, managing and disseminating information on chemicals. Public participation is mandated at the project level and to a lesser degree in the development of policies, plans and legislation. Access to justice means that the public has recourse to a review procedure, for example, if information is refused or a procedure for participation is not provided.

The Aarhus Convention is different from other MEAs. It is particularly relevant in the field of chemicals to countries which are party both to it and to the chemical conventions. Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has said:

"Although regional in scope, the significance of the Aarhus Convention is global. It is by far the most impressive elaboration of principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, which stresses the need for citizen's participation in environmental issues and for access to information on the environment held by public authorities. As such it

is the most ambitious venture in the area of 'environmental democracy' so far undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations."

The Aarhus Convention has global significance as a model and can be acceded to by any member State of the United Nations. So far, twenty-seven parties, including countries from Eastern Europe, have joined.

A protocol on pollutant release and transfer registers was adopted last May in Kiev and is also open to accession by any UN member State, whether or not it is a Party to the Convention. The Protocol requires a system of mandatory reporting by certain facilities on 86 pollutants being released or transferred. The list includes greenhouse gases, acid rain and ozone-depleting substances.

Capacity building is being given increasing priority through the Convention and the Protocol. We are currently cooperating with UNITAR on three pilot projects to implement the Convention. I would like to express particular thanks to UNITAR for having taken the lead in the organizational work behind this event. I wish you success in your deliberations these coming days.