

NGO Statement concerning the digital and green transformations for sustainable development in the region of the Economic Commission for Europe

“Enhancing trust and transparency: Using digital tools to support the green transformation” during the session on “Innovative ways to relate with the public, share information and design policy”

UNECE’s 70th session of the Commission; 18 April 2023

My name is Summer Kern, and I am deeply honored to have this opportunity to speak on the behalf of the European Environmental Bureau and EarthJustice.¹

The core of my message is this: There is no way that we can use digital tools to achieve a green transformation without transparency and the involvement of the public. But with these two things, not only are our chances of success better, but the likelihood of a faster transformation far greater.

Experience has shown that when such rights are ensured, key benefits ensue, namely better decision-making, good governance, greater public acceptance, and resilience in times of crisis.

Are there challenges in implementing such rights? Yes, there are. Relevant examples for the present purposes include making information accessible, machine readable, establishing a 1-stop shop, and a lack of awareness by public authorities and civil society. In many countries there are further gender and age concerns, and for those in vulnerable situations, as they may be the least aware of their rights, yet most in need of protection.

But the fortunate thing is we do not need to invent some framework out of nothing. We already have it in the form of the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers. These are two unique ECE legal instruments that provide lawmakers, public authorities and civil society with solid frameworks and practical tools,² all of which promote access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters thereby helping to achieve SDGs in an inclusive, collegial, and effective manner.

We see many Parties to these instruments taking up these challenges and succeeding. Thus, we see across the UNECE region Parties from the North to South, East to West, creating and improving upon Open Data portals with environmental data in machine-readable formats. We see more 1-stop shops. We see capacity-building efforts, including those for lay people to address gender and age concerns, and those in vulnerable situations, often done by us bigger NGOs with the support of the Parties.

We urge you all to do the same. Learn and share what you have learned so that we can together use digital tools and achieve a truly sustainable green transformation.

The Aarhus family is large and has collected quite some expertise along the way. And that family includes not only Parties and its authorities, but civil society.

Thank you.

¹ Both have ECOSOC consultative status, and both are members of the European ECO Forum network.

² See for example https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/ECE_MP.PP_2021_2_Add.2_E.pdf