

Intervention from Martin Bortzmeyer (Head of sustainable development unit, Ministry of ecological and inclusive transition, France)

Side-event Environmental democracy, July the 11th

Thank you very much Mrs Chairman,

I am very impressed by the work that all of you have achieved in a context far more difficult than the one we had to deal with. And while you said that you have been inspired by the Aarhus convention, I am convinced that today and in the future, we will be as largely inspired by the Escazu convention and by the own way you have chosen.

Considering the Aarhus convention, which is now quite old as it has been said, I would like to explain how it is implemented in France and how important it is right now. Then I will say a word about how we integrate the principles of the Aarhus convention in our implementation of SDG12 through a concrete example about waste. Finally, some elements on the international works about public participation, which may be the core part of our meeting.

1/ Aarhus is still a very lively reference. It is the bedrock of our regulations in order to improve projects or plans and programs with respect to their environmental impacts. Actually, it is never completed because we have to keep in mind that the more public participation is applied, the more citizens are demanding. Furthermore, they also ask that their advice is truly taken into consideration and followed up.

Considering that, we have had to deal in France with quite a few large projects, generating intense protests, such as an airport in the west of France, a dam dedicated to agricultural use, or an adventure park. That is why France recently modified its legal corpus, in 2016, after a deep consultation process, with three main lessons learned I would like to share with you :

- the first one is that participation should take place as early as possible, not only at the stage when the undertaker is assessing its environmental impacts but also, previously, when the opportunity of the project still can be considered.
- A second one is that the supervision by an outside and independent person (a guarantor) is an optimal condition.
- The third one is that, if regulations are necessary, they are not sufficient. The point is that the opinion of citizens has to be taken into consideration, in other words the consultation should be sincere. It means a sort of cultural revolution, it requires a “culture of participation” from the stakeholders, either companies or NGO’s, who have to accept the significance and the limits of these process.

2/ As I said, my second point is more specifically related to SDG 12, that we approach in France through circular economy. France has recently established a circular economy roadmap through an intense participation process. This kind of process is really effective because participation increases public awareness; furthermore, the solutions that the Government or experts can imagine are not always the best ones while bottom-based solutions can be more effective. Let me give you just one example: we face, as any country, the problem of waste collecting, sorting and recycling; public participation helps us to design the best collecting and sorting process, meaning an effective process, fitting the population’s actual capacities and level of awareness.

3/ These were national examples. In addition, France considers that the extension at an international scale is really important, and there we are involved in many works and take our full responsibility to this end. France is leader in the Aarhus convention tasks related to the “Promotion of the Principles (of this convention) in International Forums” (known as PPIF), with the aim of expanding public participation in different conventions, for example those on chemicals and waste.

That is why we warmly welcome the Escazu convention which marks a great progress in the broader application of these principles.

Moreover, and that will be my last word, the French President has decided to support the initiative to

develop a Global Pact for the Environment. It aims to enhance the legal value of, codify and update, the fundamental principles of environmental law. It aims to make these principles accessible to citizens through an international treaty. Access to information, public participation in decision making, and access to justice will thus be at the heart of this project. In this respect, I am pleased to invite you to the side-event dedicated to the Global Pact for Environment, which will take place next Tuesday, the 17th, from 1:15 PM to 2:30 PM. Thank you for your attention.