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The Aarhus Centres Network – 15 Years of OSCE Support to Address Environment and Security Challenges at Local Level

Introduction

Environment and security are closely linked, and these linkages are addressed within the OSCE's second dimension. The OSCE's environmental activities mostly aim at strengthening co-operation among states and are therefore transboundary in nature. On the other hand, numerous environmental challenges have their greatest impact at the local level and can lead to tension within and among communities if not properly addressed. This is why, since 2002, the OSCE has been establishing and supporting "Aarhus Centres", also known as "Public Environmental Information Centres" (PEICs).¹ Building on the *Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention)*, these Centres address environmental and security challenges at the local level. They provide platforms to engage a range of stakeholders, thereby serving as a mechanism for dialogue and trust-building within communities as well as at the national and transboundary levels. This contribution provides an overview of the Aarhus Centres network (which, as of November 2017, includes 60 members in 14 OSCE participating States), their main areas of activity, and lessons learned from the past 15 years.

Connections between the Environment and Security

As part of its comprehensive approach to security, the OSCE addresses challenges well beyond the sphere of military security. Vulnerabilities to negative environmental impacts and inequalities in access to resources are just as capable of undermining social cohesion and threatening stability as more conventional challenges to security. Environmental degradation and competition over national and transboundary natural resources make governing environmental issues a complex task and can cause tensions to rise. Climate change adds to this complexity and is considered a threat multiplier. Environmental co-operation, on the other hand, can help build trust and confidence and con-

Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the OSCE or any other organization.

1 In some places, Aarhus Centres are called Public Environmental Information Centres (PEICs).

tribute to sustainable development. This two-way relationship is the main rationale for the OSCE's engagement in the environmental field in its second dimension. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development further reinforced this close link by stating that "there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development".²

Environmental challenges are often transboundary in nature. Consequently, the OSCE, mainly through its Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA), promotes dialogue and co-operation on environmental issues at transboundary level. On the other hand, environmental problems can also create tension at local level. In fact, it is local communities that are usually most affected by and compelled to be first responders to environmental challenges. For example, the likelihood of water-related tensions turning into open conflict is far higher at the local than the interstate level. This is true particularly where environmental problems are part of a complex mixture of political fragility, ethnic tensions, and/or border issues. There is thus a need for dialogue and consultation not only among, but also within, countries among a wide array of stakeholders, including at local level.

One example of environmental tensions are those that stem from economic undertakings with negative environmental impacts, such as mining or the construction of hydro power plants, particularly when instruments such as environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are not performed properly. When the local population is not consulted and not provided with reliable information or the means to raise their concerns, protests can become inevitable and can have a broader impact on political stability. Similarly, disasters such as floods and mudflows, which affect communities in shared valleys and river basins, require co-ordination in terms of preparedness and emergency responses. If this co-ordination is impeded by borders or ethnic divisions, it increases the risk that natural hazards will have a disastrous impact, including human casualties.

As a result, good environmental governance, including transparency, accountability, stakeholder dialogue, and public participation, emerged as a cross-cutting issue in the thematic work of the OCEEA and many OSCE field operations. Through its activities in the field of environmental governance, the OSCE aims to promote enhanced dialogue and consultation among a range of stakeholders with diverse interests, priorities, and needs. Such activities are important not only for effective problem-solving but also to build trust and confidence among central and local governments, civil society, and the private sector.

2 United Nations, General Assembly, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, 70/1. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1, 21 October 2015, available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

The OSCE participating States have committed themselves to promoting environmental good governance in various policy documents, starting with the 1999 *Istanbul Charter for European Security*. Since then, the participating States have underscored the importance of processes and institutions for providing timely information about economic and environmental issues of public interest (*OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension*, 2003); of raising awareness about the potential impact of environmental challenges on security (*Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security*, 2007); of engaging Aarhus Centres in improving the environmental footprint of energy-related activities (Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/13, 2013); and of disaster risk reduction (Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/14, 2014). Unfortunately, in 2017 the draft Ministerial Decision on “Greening our economies and fostering our environmental cooperation” did not find consensus among the participating States.

The Aarhus Convention

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) is the host of several multilateral environmental agreements that have great significance for the OSCE region and the OSCE’s work in the second dimension – in particular the *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes* (Water Convention), the *Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents*, the *Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context* (Espoo Convention), and the *Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters* (Aarhus Convention). The development of the Water Convention was initiated by the 1989 Sofia Meeting on the Protection of the Environment organized by the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). What all these conventions have in common is that they address transboundary challenges and require co-operation among states for their implementation. To facilitate this, the OSCE has a longstanding and close partnership with the UNECE in promoting these multilateral environmental agreements and assisting its participating States in their implementation.

The Aarhus Convention, adopted in 1998, consists of three pillars: (1) *Access to information* ensures the right of citizens to receive environmental information from public authorities; (2) *Public participation in decision-making* ensures the right of citizens to participate in the preparation of plans, programmes, policies, and legislation related to the environment; and (3) *Access to justice* ensures the right of citizens to have access to review procedures when their rights of access to information or public participation in environmental matters are violated. In 2003, the meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention adopted the *Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer*

Registers (PRTR), which regulates public access to information about pollution by establishing inventories of pollution from industrial sites and other sources.

The Aarhus Convention and the PRTR Protocol are the only legally binding international instruments that embody the principle of participatory environmental governance that was affirmed in Principle Ten of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, adopted globally in 1992. The Aarhus Convention is also unique in the way it links citizens' environmental and human rights. Its core principles – the right to information, the right to participate, and the right to justice – empower citizens to play a greater role in addressing environmental challenges and promoting more sustainable forms of development. Its enforcement can therefore be seen as a precondition for, or at least as having close links to, the proper implementation of several other multilateral environmental agreements.

As of November 2017, the Aarhus Convention and the PRTR Protocol have been ratified by 46 and 34 OSCE participating States, respectively. They jointly help to address a wide array of environmental challenges within the OSCE region, ranging from climate change to disaster risk reduction, water pollution, and hazardous waste management. They also support governments in engaging the public in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For the OSCE, the Aarhus Convention is therefore an important tool for addressing environment and security challenges, especially at local level. It is also instrumental in strengthening environmental cooperation among its participating States and in promoting good governance in the environmental sphere. The following section will elaborate on how this is put into practice.

The Work of the Aarhus Centres

In an effort to assist its participating States in implementing the Aarhus Convention, the OSCE has been supporting the establishment and operation of Aarhus Centres/PEICs through its field operations and the OCEEA since 2002.

Aarhus Centres assist governments in implementing the Aarhus Convention and help citizens to better understand and exercise their rights as specified by the Convention. They also provide platforms to engage citizens, governments, and the private sector in dialogue on environmental challenges. An Aarhus Centre is not necessarily an institution in itself but can best be understood as a function performed by a host institution – which can be a government or a non-governmental entity. There are Aarhus Centres hosted by Ministries of Environment, by local authorities, and by NGOs.

As neutral platforms, and in accordance with the pillars of the Aarhus Convention, Aarhus Centres have the following main functions:

- *Access to information*: dissemination of environmental information, for example via public or university libraries, publication of material on Aarhus Centre websites, translation of international documents into national languages, publication of brochures that explain environmental issues in a way that is understandable to the wider public, preparation of targeted information for various vulnerable groups, dissemination of information on draft legislation and other policy documents for input and feedback by NGOs or citizens, organization of public hearings;
- *Public participation and stakeholder dialogue*: organization of awareness-raising campaigns, environmental monitoring, holding roundtables, involvement in the development of legislation and policies and in environmental impact assessment procedures, engaging vulnerable groups, e.g. children, youth, women, and the rural population in targeted activities;
- *Access to justice*: provision of legal advice to citizens and NGOs on environmental matters;
- *Training*: provision (together with the OSCE) of training courses for NGOs and civil society groups as well as for disseminators (teachers, journalists) and interested citizenry on the Aarhus Convention and other environmental topics.

To perform these functions, Aarhus Centres receive training and financial support from the OCEEA through targeted projects and, in countries where they exist, from OSCE field operations. So far, most Aarhus Centres have focused on facilitating access to information; some are active in fostering public participation, while only a few are involved in activities related to access to justice.

The first Aarhus Centre was established in 2002 in Yerevan, Armenia. Since then, in close co-operation with the host countries and the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat, the Aarhus Centres network has rapidly grown. The newest Aarhus Centre was opened in November 2017 at Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan. During the last 15 years, 60 OSCE-supported Aarhus Centres have been established in 14 countries in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia:³

- Albania (Shkodra, Tirana, Vlora),
- Armenia (Alaverdi, Aparan, Ararat, Dilijan, Gavar, Goris, Gyumri, Hrazdan, Ijevan, Kapan, Stepanavan, Vanadzor, Yeghegnadzor, Yeghvard, Yerevan),
- Azerbaijan (Baku),
- Belarus (Minsk),⁴

3 A full overview is available at: <https://aarhus.osce.org>.

4 A second Aarhus Centre in Belarus, located in Hrodna, was established with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

- Bosnia and Herzegovina (Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Tuzla),
- Georgia (Tbilisi),
- Kazakhstan (Aktau, Aktobe, Almaty, Astana,⁵ Atyrau, Burabay, Karaganda, Kyzylorda, Kokshetau, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk, Uralsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk),
- Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek, Issyk-Kul, Osh),
- Moldova (Chişinău, Bender),
- Montenegro (Berane, Niksic, Podgorica),
- Serbia (Kragujevac, New Belgrade, Nis, Novi Sad, Subotica),
- Tajikistan (Dushanbe, Garm, Jayhun, Khorog, Khujand, Kurgan-Tyube, Tursunzoda),
- Turkmenistan (Ashgabat),
- Ukraine (Kyiv).

The areas where the various Aarhus Centres are active depend on the needs and priorities of the cities and communities they serve. Water resources management, disaster risk reduction, climate change, hazardous waste management, urban waste management, extractive industries, green economy, EIAs, eco-journalism, environmental legislation, and youth empowerment are among the main thematic areas addressed by the Aarhus Centres, as the following examples illustrate.

Engaging Stakeholders in Uranium Legacy Remediation in Central Asia

An estimated one billion tons of waste produced in the mining and processing of radioactive ores during the Soviet era is still stored at tailings sites and in mining waste dumps in Central Asia. These are located in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and pose a serious threat to livelihoods, human health, and the environment, not only in the immediate surroundings of these legacy sites but also across boundaries. Lack of awareness of health and safety threats continues to be a major challenge for local populations living in the vicinity of uranium waste sites. While the international community steps up their remediation efforts, local people also need to be informed and consulted about the risks and benefits of different remediation options.

The OSCE has joined forces with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment), working within the framework of the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC). With funding from the European Commission, they are supporting stakeholder engagement in the remediation of uranium legacy sites and in raising the local population's awareness in selected communities. Given their longstanding engagement in this field, the Aarhus Centres in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Khujand (Tajikistan) are involved in these activities. In

5 There are two Centres in Astana: the local Astana Aarhus Centre and the National Aarhus Centre of Kazakhstan, hosted by the Ministry of Energy.

order to reach remote communities, three additional PEICs were opened in Mailuu-Suu, Shekaftar and Min-Kush in Kyrgyzstan, operating under the guidance of the Aarhus Centre Osh. Through these Centres, local residents are able not only to receive information on the risks stemming from the sites and guidance on radioactive safety but also to raise their concerns and expectations about the remediation work. The Aarhus Centres and PEICs organize awareness-raising meetings and provide training courses on radiation safety and related issues for local stakeholders, including teachers and schoolchildren. In addition, booklets, posters, information boards, TV programmes, newspaper articles, and videos explain the complex technical aspects of remediation in a way that can easily be understood by the general public; this helps to overcome mistrust and reduce fear. The long-established relationship based on mutual trust between the Aarhus Centres and local stakeholders, from both the governmental and the non-governmental side, is the key to the Aarhus Centres' successful performance with regard to these sensitive issues.

Access to Information and Participatory Review of Environmental Legislation – Georgia

Georgia's Aarhus Centre was established in 2006. In 2013, in an effort at institutionalization, it was integrated into the then Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection (MoENRP) as Georgia's "Environmental Information and Education Centre" (EIEC). One of its core activities is to organize the participatory review of environmental legislation. An example of such a participatory review process is the public hearings the Aarhus Centre organized on draft laws on "Waste Management" and "Water Resource Management" in 2013-2015. The EIEC organized public discussions with local communities and governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders in 20 municipalities throughout the country. The main roles of the EIEC have been to coordinate public discussions on these draft laws, provide expertise, facilitate access to information for the wider public, conduct awareness-raising campaigns, and facilitate policy dialogue among stakeholders. The Centre also analysed the compliance of both draft laws with the requirements of the Aarhus Convention and provided recommendations to the MoENRP for consideration. This participatory review process contributed to the achievement of consensus among private and public sectors on the water legislation and the waste code in Georgia.

The Aarhus Centre has also dedicated considerable effort to ensuring improved public access to environmental information and public participation in decision-making processes. With the support of the OSCE, the Aarhus Centre in Georgia developed a web-based register/portal for environmental permits issued by the MoENRP. The portal has been in operation since 2009 and has been upgraded several times. It provides the public with easy and

centralized access to environmental impact assessment reports (EIA reports) and environmental permits, thus contributing significantly to increased transparency.

Participatory Flood-Risk Management in Serbia

The disastrous floods that hit wide parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia in May 2014 revealed that the dissolution of the civil emergency structures of the former Yugoslavia had left a gap in co-ordinated disaster prevention and response. Not only are local communities the first to be affected by and to respond to such disasters, but they also possess historical and practical knowledge that is often underutilized. The OSCE Mission to Serbia was engaged in improving flood management practices in Serbia long before 2014 and has built on this experience to support Aarhus Centres in the country in improving public participation in the prevention and management of flood risks

With support from the OCEEA and the OSCE Mission to Serbia, the Aarhus Centres in Novi Sad and Nis helped to establish local disaster risk reduction (DRR) networks. In East Serbia, a local “Flood Risk Action Alliance for the Timok River Basin” was set up in conjunction with the Aarhus Centre of South and East Serbia (Aarhus Centre Nis), with members drawn from central government, the private sector, local authorities, the media, and NGOs. After identifying the highest risk communities as their targets, the alliance agreed on an action plan aimed at fostering community resilience to floods. As part of this action plan, the Aarhus Centre Nis organized a flood risk disaster awareness campaign. Similar alliances were also established in Vranje and Bajina Basta. Following this example, the Aarhus Centre Novi Sad promoted the establishment of a local DRR network. Novi Sad is the second biggest city in Serbia (with around 360,000 inhabitants) and is prone to disasters such as fires, floods, and landslides. The DRR network includes 20 representatives of the media, financial institutions, state agencies dealing with water and environment, and civil society organizations, including those dealing with people with special needs. These local networks and alliances strengthen co-operation among local actors in order to improve disaster preparedness, facilitate training, and co-ordinate the dissemination of information among citizens.

These are only a few examples of Aarhus Centre activities. By carrying out activities of this kind, the Aarhus Centres have proved themselves to be important players in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at local level. The Aarhus Centres make a contribution to meeting several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through their engagement in monitoring, preventing, and reducing pollution; disaster risk reduction; water management; climate change adaptation; and mobilizing youth and women. Most important, however, is their role in SDG 16 on promoting

peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. More specifically, the Centres contribute directly to targets 16.6 (develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels), 16.7 (ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels) and 16.10 (ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements).

Inter-Agency and Intra-Agency Co-operation

The Aarhus Centres network also represents an exemplary case of co-operation and synergy among OSCE executive structures and between the OSCE and other international organizations.

The OSCE co-operates closely with the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat. The Convention's policy documents provide strategic guidance for the work of the Aarhus Centres, while the Aarhus Centres work closely with the Convention National Focal Points to implement the Convention on the ground and generate input for the further enforcement of the Convention and the improvement of relevant tools. The Secretariat participates in relevant OSCE and Aarhus Centre meetings, helping to shape strategic discussions. In return, the OSCE participates in meetings under the Aarhus Convention and enables the participation and active contribution of Aarhus Centres in those meetings.

The Aarhus Centres have also received significant support via the ENVSEC Initiative. The ENVSEC Initiative is a partnership of the OSCE, the UNDP, UN Environment, the UNECE, and the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC). Aarhus Centres participate in ENVSEC public outreach projects and receive training on specific topics (e.g. climate change and disaster risk reduction). Multi-country ENVSEC projects also link Aarhus Centres from different countries (see also below).

The network of Aarhus Centres has evolved to its current situation through close collaboration and the use of synergies between the OCEEA and the field operations. In most cases, it is the field operations that establish Aarhus Centres upon request of the national and local authorities in the host countries and provide them with basic support. Depending on the available budget, they also support Centres' activities. The OCEEA, on the other hand, raises extra-budgetary funds for regional and cross-regional projects in which the staff of selected Aarhus Centres participate and receive training and grants for activities on awareness raising and public participation. These joint efforts make it possible to sustain the network with the limited funds available within the OSCE.

Networking among Aarhus Centres

The OSCE has supported not only the activities of Aarhus Centres at local level, but also their networking at national, sub-regional, and regional levels, as a contribution to dialogue and trust-building. There are four aspects to such efforts:

1. National networking facilitated by OSCE field operations

In many countries, the OSCE field operations organize regular joint training events and annual meetings that bring together Aarhus Centres from all the regions of the country for an exchange of information, mutual learning, and joint training.

2. Multi-country projects at regional and cross-regional level by the OCEEA

In numerous regional or cross-regional extra-budgetary funded projects implemented by the OCEEA (sometimes through ENVSEC projects), Aarhus Centres participate in project components related to capacity-building and public outreach. Some of the projects developed by the OCEEA are exclusively targeted at the Aarhus Centres, such as the recent projects “Strengthening the capacities of Aarhus Centres in disaster risk reduction (DRR) to enhance awareness of local communities” and “Strengthening the role of the Aarhus Centres in addressing environmental challenges in Eastern Europe”. In these projects, Aarhus Centres from various countries (and sometimes also regions) participate in joint training, develop and implement activities, and share their experiences, thereby learning from each other and strengthening their ties and understanding.

3. Regional and bilateral activities

Aarhus Centres are becoming increasingly engaged at the regional level through their joint activities across borders, as well as their active participation in international meetings, transboundary consultations, and decision-making processes. In two instances, such networking has resulted in formal commitments.

In the Fergana Valley – which is shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and which faces many serious environmental challenges ranging from environmental degradation to water scarcity, uranium legacy sites, and natural hazards – the OSCE supports the Aarhus Centres in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and Khujand, Tajikistan. These two Centres have been collaborating for several years within the framework of the OSCE projects to face these joint challenges. They have, for example, conducted joint eco-journalism competitions and offered joint training. In 2014, the Aarhus Centres in Osh and Khujand signed a Memorandum of Co-operation and developed a joint working plan to tackle environmental challenges in the Fergana Valley.

In South-eastern Europe, the Aarhus Centres formalized their collaboration as well. In 2015, the 13 Aarhus Centres from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia signed a joint declaration on co-operation. In it, they state their commitment to strengthening their partnership to reinforce their promotion and implementation of the Aarhus Convention, to facilitate dialogue among civil society organizations across borders, and to address common environmental concerns more effectively.

4. Annual co-ordination meetings organized by the OCEEA

Since 2008, the OCEEA has regularly brought together Aarhus Centres, national Aarhus Convention Focal Points, and representatives from other international organizations from the entire OSCE region. These meetings focus on information exchange and discussion of joint future priorities and take place on an annual basis.⁶ They also support capacity building on selected topics of joint concern.

Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

2017 marks the 15th year since the establishment of the first Aarhus Centre, and this is a good point to review the experiences and draw key lessons that have been learned, as summarized below.

Government ownership is a prerequisite: Government ownership and support, as well as the active engagement of the Aarhus Convention National Focal Points in the activities of the Aarhus Centres, are among the prerequisites for the success of the Aarhus Centres.

The process itself is important: Most of the Aarhus Centres are hosted by local administrations or local NGOs and interact closely with the communities in their localities. The active engagement of local stakeholders in Aarhus Centre activities contributes to good local governance. It also enables Aarhus Centres to be fully aware of local needs and priorities and ensures the relevance of their activities.

Building local capacities: Enhancing the ability of Aarhus Centres and their local stakeholders to address priority environmental challenges increases the sustainability of local initiatives.

Learning from each other: Annual Aarhus Centre Meetings, sub-regional meetings, and exchange visits among Aarhus Centres have enabled the sharing of experiences and lessons learned and have led to the replication and expansion of best practices.

Partnerships are essential: The close co-operation between the OSCE and the UNECE Aarhus Convention Secretariat and collaboration with other ENVSEC partners have played an important role in the success of the Aarhus

6 Though no meeting was held in 2012.

Centres, as did the complementary engagement of the OCEEA and field operations.

No blueprint model: The institutional set-up of Aarhus Centres varies from country to country, and even within countries. Some are hosted by ministries with a professional team and serve as their public outreach tool; others are located in remote areas and depend on one or two dedicated individuals and a small group of volunteers. Some of the host NGOs are strong and experienced, with Aarhus Centre activities being merely one of the many activities they perform; other NGOs need a lot of support and capacity-building. This diversity reflects the variety of challenges and resource needs, and it can be a source of mutual learning and inspiration. It also means, however, that the same level of effectiveness and professionalism cannot be expected of all Aarhus Centres.

Despite their achievements, the Aarhus Centres face two main challenges in the future. First, most of the Aarhus Centres depend on financial support from the OSCE. While some of them have sought to mobilize resources from other donors, only a few have been successful. This is partly related to their limited fundraising capacities and partly to their institutional structure, since not all Aarhus Centres have the status of a legal entity, which would allow them to receive funds. The Centres' financial sustainability is therefore an important issue in the current discussion among the OCEEA, the field operations, and their partners. The second challenge is linked to the difficulties encountered in sustaining effective support for Aarhus Centres in countries without OSCE field operations. What needs to be discussed is how the experiences gained in Belarus and Georgia can be applied in other countries and to a larger number of Aarhus Centres.

The further consolidation and strengthening of the network is therefore a priority, particularly due to the wide-ranging services and benefits the Aarhus Centres provide to their host countries (and can provide in the future), including in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. Aarhus Centres are ideal platforms for localizing the SDGs, reinforcing local ownership and raising awareness of the goals. They can contribute to national and local SDG review processes and assist in the implementation of relevant SDGs.

Conclusion

After 15 years, Aarhus Centres have developed into an integral and widely recognized part of the OSCE's work in the second dimension. They have developed close interaction with central and local government agencies, civil society, and other stakeholders, which allows them to jointly address various challenges, including sensitive issues. Their long-term prospects remain insecure to a certain extent, since their capacities and funding still depend mostly

on OSCE resources. However, with the knowledge and expertise they have accumulated on various environmental topics, the Aarhus Centres are now respected partners of governments, NGOs, and increasingly donors, who provide new openings for them to expand their partnerships and to benefit from future funding opportunities. For the OSCE, the Aarhus Centres Network, with its 60 members in 14 countries, remains a crucial tool to address environment and security challenges at local level and to promote co-operation among a wide array of stakeholders within and across borders.