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Vienna, March 2010

Presentation of project results  
**„Almaty Guidelines – Practical experience in Austria**

The project was carried out by **Justice and Environment Austria** (J&E Austria) and **OEKOBUERO** with the financial support of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Environment from July to December 2009. The primary aim of the project was to determine **how and if public participation in international forums (PP) takes place in Austrian practice** and to inform authorities as well as NGOs about the existence and the contents of the **Aarhus Almaty Guidelines**. To this end J&E Austria/OEKOBUERO carried out interviews with ministry personnel as well as NGO representatives active in international discussions and negotiations. The focus of the interviews was on their experiences regarding public participation and on recommendations they would have for enhancing the impact of participation from a practitioner's point of view. Based on the results of the interviews J&E Austria/OEKOBUERO compiled **recommendations**, which were presented at a workshop in the premises of the MoE. The discussions at the workshop as well later comments via email by the participants lead to adaptations in the recommendations document. The final version (in German) is available under: [http://doku.cac.at/alamaty\\_infosheet\\_jan2010.pdf](http://doku.cac.at/alamaty_infosheet_jan2010.pdf). Workshop programme and presentations (in German) are available under: <http://www.oekobuero.at/start.asp?showmenu=yes&fr=&b=1326&ID=230765>

The interviews, which were carried out provided following basic results:

- The Almaty Guidelines are practically **unknown**, only those persons directly involved in Aarhus issues had basic knowledge about them.
- Public participation as described in the guidelines takes place (even without awareness of Almaty), at least in parts and in specific areas. **Examples** for very open processes are Alpine Convention or CITES negotiations, while in negotiations about for example climate change, the public is in many cases excluded, contrary to the guideline's recommendations.
- As a general conclusion it can be noted, that in international forums the recommendations contained in the Almaty Guidelines have **not been completely implemented**. In specific areas public participation nevertheless works very satisfactory, while in other areas (to mention in particular the EU coordination process) participation is very restricted.

The **recommendations** which were developed follow the general framework of the Almaty guidelines but do not cover all issues touched by them. Generally it can be observed, that PP in international forums has not been institutionalized in Austria. The degree of possible involvement varies strongly, depending on the observed field.

- As a general recommendation J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO consider it important to **formalize PP** as regards for example regular national coordination meetings with participation of the (informed) public.

Generally a need for increased information exchange could be observed, both on the side of authorities and NGOs.

- What J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO consider particularly important is that information is provided **early enough** when all options for decision are still open.
- The information should be as **comprehensive** (e.g. copies of original documents) as possible.
- **Refusals** to provide information should be issued in writing and contain an exhaustive explanation for the decision taken. **Summaries** of the requested documents or other general information should nevertheless be disclosed.
- An urgent wish for **pro-active dissemination** of information by the authorities was also voiced by the NGOs. Websites can be used for the dissemination of basic information.

As regards the practical aspects of actual participation in international discussions J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO received varying comments from state and NGO representatives. Generally NGOs wish formalized participation possibilities such as a secured place in a national delegation. State negotiators on the other hand, want to leave their options for an exclusion of the public open and do not wish an “over-formalized” access to PP.

- J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO recommend the inclusion of representatives of the public in the **national delegations**.
- Nevertheless it has to be accepted that in particular cases this may contravene the interests of the state negotiators involved. Therefore an **exclusion of the public** in specific cases has to be accepted.
- Since participation, in particular in international organizations, can be **prohibitively expensive** J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO recommend that the government provides for the **financing of at least one NGOs seat** for the participation in international negotiations. Projects involving PP could be an alternative financing method. This assistance should cover the cost of travel and accommodation.
- The Almaty Guidelines foresee that due account should be taken of **the results of PP**. This is absolutely recommended by J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO. In cases where the results are not, or only partially taken into account J&E Austria/OEKOBUEO recommends the issuing of information about this fact and the underlying considerations to those that have participated.

What became clear from practically all interviews was that the **personal relationships** between the persons involved (in particular authorities and NGOs but also organs of international conventions etc.) are essential for an effective PP. A solid basis for discussion built upon trust is the best precondition for a fruitful cooperation between the public and state authorities. Therefore J&E Austria strongly recommends measures such as regular meetings, participation in events and similar as **confidence building measures**.

The project results were disseminated amongst those who participated in the interviews, their colleagues and among the interested public. An article for the Austrian environmental science journal "Wissenschaft und Umwelt" ("Science and Environment") is currently in preparation.

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