

ASPECTS CONCERNING PUBLIC ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

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***Abstract:** Environmental education is vital because we all need resources to live and we all have a moral responsibility to future generations in order to have a quality life. It is important to educate people and connect them to the natural around them and to provide accessible information as this is a first step of them participation. Environmental management and governance involve knowledge and understanding of environmental issues. Access to the environmental information is an important aspect of our society that has a better access nowadays, in the “internet era”. This paper is aimed to offer a framework of the environmental information circuit, from international to a local point of view.*

***Keywords:** Environment, information, participation, organization, data, reports.*

Introduction

Information is important for people because it promotes problem solving approaches and thinking skills like asking questions and seeking answers, finding information, forming opinions, evaluating sources and making decisions fostering responsible citizens. Politically, it has been created the necessary legislation and mechanisms needed in order to manage different environmental issues, including the one of public information.

Environmental information is any information in written, visual, audio, electronic or other material form about (REC Handbook: 2003):

- the state of elements of the environment: atmosphere, water, soils, landscape and biodiversity;
- the factors, reflecting on the state of the elements of the environment such as waste disposal, substances, noise, vibrations, radiation;
- activities and measures that have an impact on the elements of the environment (administrative measures, international contracts,

policies, legislature, plans and programs) and economic analyses in connection with them;

- the state of human health and safety;
- cultural sites, built structures and facilities;
- emissions, discharges and other harmful impacts on the environment.

Environmental information - from international guidelines to local actions

The Aarhus Convention (Aarhus, 1998*) establishes a number of rights of the public with regard to the environment. The Parties to the Convention are required to make the necessary provisions so that public authorities (at local, national, regional or local level) will contribute to these rights to become effective (EC, 2015). The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, called “Aarhus Convention” took place in Aarhus, Denmark in 1998 as part of the “Environment for Europe” process, which promote access as a means to improve public participation in environmental decision making and awareness of environmental issues.

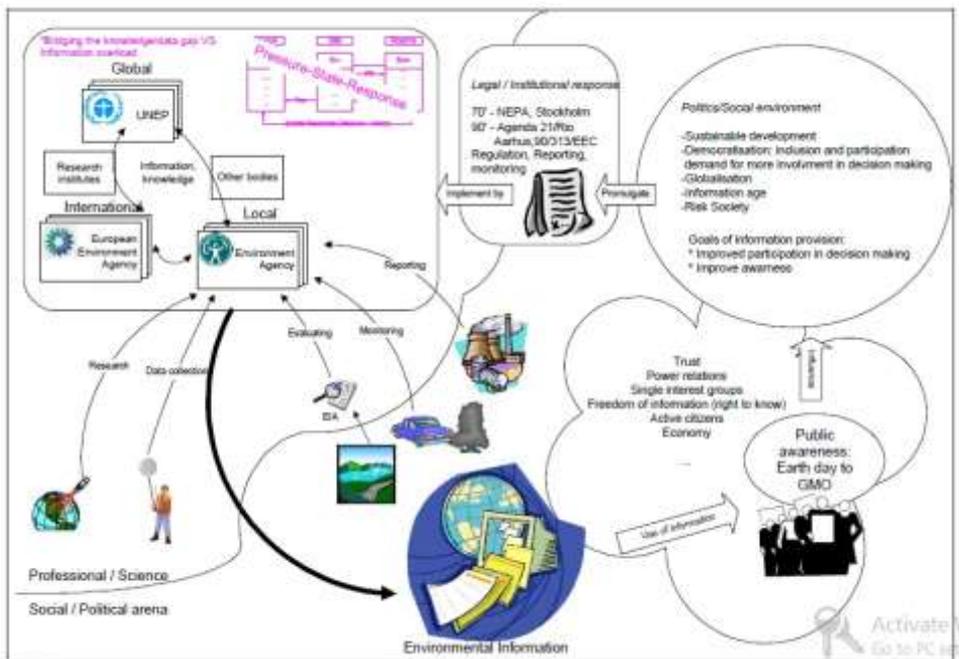
The Convention provides for:

- The right of everyone to receive environmental information that is held by public authorities. Applicants are entitled to obtain this information within one month of the request and without having to say why they require it. In addition, public authorities are obliged, under the Convention, to actively disseminate environmental information in their possession;
- The right to participate in environmental decision-making. Arrangements are to be made public authorities to enable the public affected and environmental non-governmental organizations to comment on, for example, proposals for projects affecting the environment, or plans and programmes relating to the environment, these comments to be taken into due account in decision-making, and information to be provided on the final decisions and the reasons for it;
- The right to review procedures to challenge public decisions that have been made without respecting the two aforementioned rights or environmental law in general.

- In order to create specialized programmes for monitoring the environmental conditions and research, institutions or so-called “environmental bodies” were created from a global scale (United Nations Programme) through the European level (European Environmental Agency - EEA) to local level.

The publication of Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” is considered a turning point of the 20th century environmental movement and the emergence of “the environment” as a substantial topic of public agenda (McCormick:1995).

Figure 1. The context of environmental information



Source: Mordecai H., (2002)

The connection between regulatory measures and the collection of information dates to the early responses to the modern environmental movement. One of the milestones is the USA National Environmental Policy Act - NEPA from 1969. NEPA explicitly binds environmental politics and information with an annual report on the state of the environment and environmental impact assessment. Other countries went through similar shifts in policy and public awareness in this period like Sweden, known as being one of the pioneering environmental commitment country (Mordecai: 2003).

The major global event that marks this period is the United Nations conference on “The Human Environment” held in Stockholm in June 1972. The major outcome from the conference was the creation of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Once the program started, considerable gaps in data and knowledge have been found and the task to fill them was handed to the Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS) unit. In 1972 UN Stockholm Conference focused international attention on environmental issues, especially those relating to environmental degradation and transboundary pollution. The last concept was particularly important, as it highlighted the fact that pollution does not recognize political or geographical boundaries, but affects countries and people beyond its point of origin. Over the decades this concept was broadened to encompass environmental issues that are the truly transnational in scope. Important environmental problems include all kinds of pollution, climate change, the depletion of the ozone layer, the use and management of oceans and fresh water resources, deforestation, desertification and land degradation, hazardous waste and depleting biological diversity. In 1973 the European Community (EC) moved beyond strictly economic issues to establish a medium term plan with declared targets and goals (UNEP: 2015).

The United Nations on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 3-14 June 1992, as an international recognition of the fact that environmental protection and natural resources management must be integrated with social-economic issues of poverty and underdevelopment. This idea has been captured in the definition of “sustainable development” as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) in 1987 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The Summit was bringing global attention to the fact that environmental problems were intimately linked to economic conditions and problems of social justice. It showed that social, environmental and economic needs must exist in balance with other for sustainable outcomes in long term. This conference held on the 20th anniversary of the first International Conference on the Human Environment from Stockholm. A major achievement of UNCED was Agenda 21, a through and broad-ranging programme of actions demanding new ways of investigation in our future to reach global sustainable development in the 21st century (Johannesburg Summit: 2002).

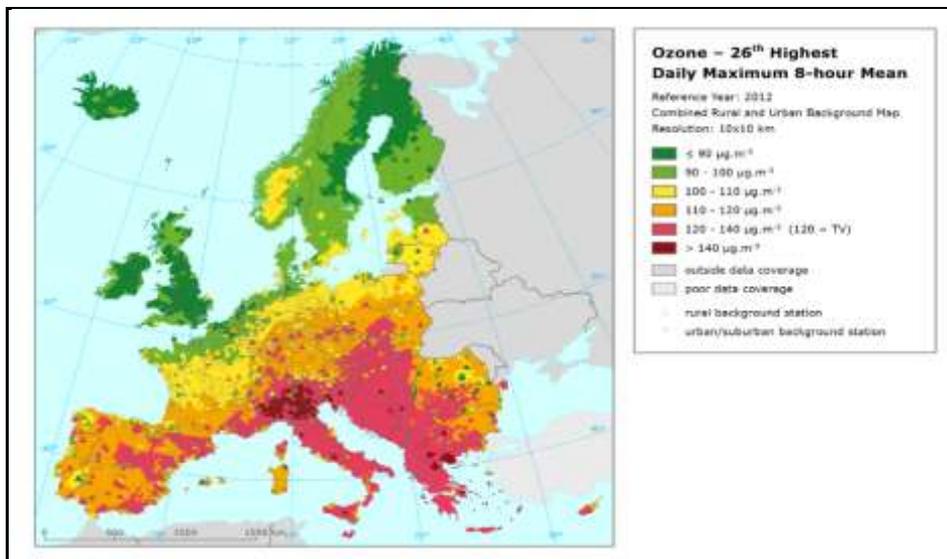
The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - or Rio+20 – took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on 20-22 June 2012. In Rio Member States decided to launch a process to develop a set of Suitable Development Goals which will build upon the Millennium Development Goals and adopted ground-breaking guidelines on green economy policies. The Rio +20 Conference resulted in over 700 voluntary commitments and witnessed the formation of new partnerships to advance sustainable development (Rio +20: 2012).

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is an agency of the United Nations that coordinates its environmental activities, assisting developing countries in implementing environmentally sound policies and practices. UNEP publishes many reports, atlases and newsletters. UNEP's main activities are related to climate change, disasters and conflicts, ecosystem management, environmental governance, environment under review, harmful substances and resource efficiency (UNEP: 2015).

The Environment Agency (EEA) is European Union's agency that has the task to provide sound, independent information on the environment. EEA's mandate is to help the European Community and member countries make informed decisions about improving the environment, integrating environmental considerations into economic policies and moving towards sustainability and to coordinate the European environment information and observation network – Eionet (EEA, 2015).

European Union has different institutions that are focused on obtaining different information regarding soil, water quality, waste management or chemical wastes. For example, The European Monitoring and Evaluation Programme (EMEP) is a scientifically based and policy driven programme under the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution for international cooperation to solve transboundary air pollutants. The programme offers maps regarding emissions inventories and projection and integrated assessment modelling as exemplified in Figure 2 (EMEP, 2015).

Figure 2. Ozone daily maximum 8 hour-mean distribution in Europe for 2012



Source: EMEP, 2015

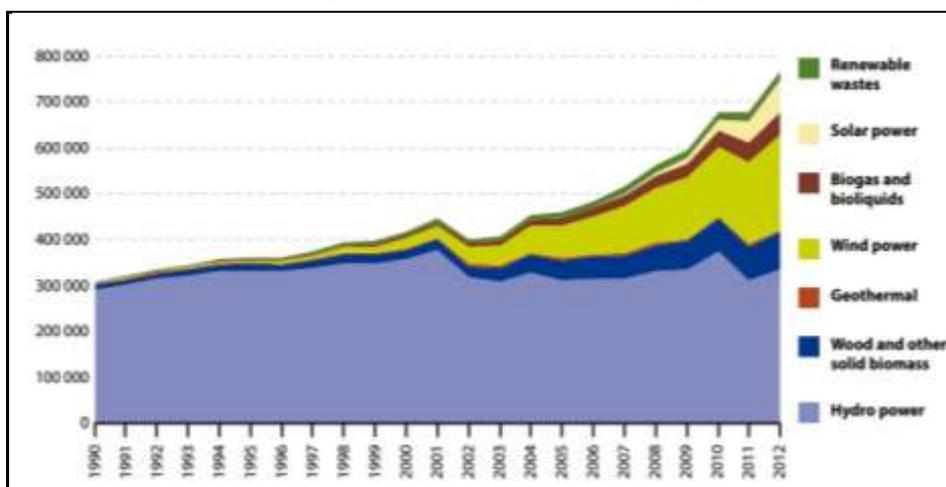
As a part of European Union starting 2007, Romania is implementing the specific Directives in various areas as air quality, waste water, biodiversity, industrial emissions or noise emissions. The legal framework of this actions are provided by the following institutions:

- Ministry of the Environment, Waters and Forests Management (previous names Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Ministry of the Environment and Water Administration) is the national policy-making organism in the areas of environment, water management and forest management, fulfilling the role of state authority, of coordination and control of this areas of interest, directly or through specialized technic organisms authorities and public institutions subordinated and coordinated by this Minister. The fields of competences are: industrial pollution control, quality of air and ambient noise, management of protected areas, biodiversity conservation, environmental infrastructure, waste management, soil protection, sustainable development, water management, meteorology, forest management, climatic changes, hydrology or dangerous chemicals issues (MEWFM, 2015).
- The National Environmental Protection Agency is a specialized authority of the public central administration, subordinated to the Ministry of the Environment, Waters and Forests Management. This agency has attributes in the following areas:

- Strategic environmental planning;
 - Environmental factors monitoring;
 - Drawing up the report on State of Environment;
 - Permitting on activities which have an impact on the environment;
 - Implementation of the environmental legislation and policies at national, regional and local level;
 - Reporting to the European Environment Agency, through Eionet network, the priority data flows for air quality, climate change, protected areas, soil contamination and water;
 - Maintaining a permanent connection with the European Chemicals Agency (NAEP, 2015).
- Local Environmental Protection Agencies are public authorities with county-level responsibility that work to implement and enforce national environmental legislation and the EU environmental acquis. One of the specific tasks are to record, collect, process and evaluate data on the condition and changes of air, soil or water quality and to compile the annual state of the environment report (EPA Iași, 2015).

Eurostat is the statistical office of the European Union that consolidates the data from National Statistical Institutes and other competent bodies using harmonized methodology, publishes official statistics of the EU and offers comparable, reliable and objective figures (Eurostat, 2015).

Figure 3. Example of data and graphic issued by Eurostat: Gross electricity generation from renewable energy sources, EU-28, 1990-2012 (giga watt hours)



Source: Eurostat, 2012

Environmental Protection Agency of Iași (EPA Iași, 2013) is publishing Annual Activity Reports and Annual State of the Environment Report at County Level. This Reports represent the main source of information for city's citizens. On the website of the institution it can be found reports starting with the year 2000. More simplistic at first with just a few environmental factors analyzed, it become nowadays a complex source of information regarding the following issues:

- County profile – geographical and climate data, demography, natural resources and economic information;
- Air quality – atmospheric pollutants emission, air quality, air pollution, accidental pollution, major environmental accidents, state air quality pressures;
- Freshwater – water resources, quantities and flows, surface waters, underground waters, potable water, sewage collection systems, wastewater treatments, major environmental accidents, sustainable management of water resources;
- Land use – soil characteristics (quality, use, accidental pollution) and forest condition;
- Nature protection and biodiversity – protected natural area management;
- Waste management – types, quantities and perspectives;
- Climate changes;
- Environment, health and life quality – pesticide and chemical substances from the environment, radioactivity of the environment, phonic pollution;

Information and public awareness represents an ongoing concern of EPA Iași, as it can be found out from the annual activity report for the year 2014 (EPA Iași, 2014). The agency initiate information campaigns which included seminars for schools and local authorities, press release and leaflets distribution on World Wetlands Day, Earth Hour or World Migratory Bird Day. During World Environment Day, the EPA actions included thematic seminars, contests, exposition of recycled objects, electrical and electronic equipment waste collection and articles in local newspapers, informative leaflets distribution or partnership with the libraries, faculties or local entrepreneurs. During European Mobility Week, there were organized information campaigns regarding the sustainable transport concept promoting the use of bicycles, public transport system and low pollutants emission vehicles.

When analyzing the annual reports it can be pointed out the fact that Environmental Protection Agency from Iași is focused mainly for environmental actions in schools: movies projections with environmental messages, debates, artistic manifestations and environment projects with

prizes, waste management trainings, lessons on different environmental subjects and leaflets distribution.

Iași has a few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are activating in the field of the environmental protection. Most of them were set up by students and are affiliated to faculties such as Biology or Geography. These NGOs are active only during the study semester and the projects that are developed are focusing on information campaigns for the city's citizens regarding to some environmental programs, field trips, seminars, waste cleaning from the forests or rivers around the city and tree planting.

One of NGO that has permanent activity and is the most visible for the last years in Iași is MaiBine. MaiBine has the following areas of interest and action:

- Promote of the civic spirit and social responsibility;
- Supports disadvantaged groups;
- Encourages local and fair trade;
- Ecology and environmental protection;
- Promotes local artisans and Romanian traditions;
- Creating a platform education for sustainable development.

The NGO has create many complex and various informative materials and campaigns adapted for Iași such as: workshops regarding human ecology, civic participation leaflets, civic guidelines regarding wastes and sanitation, City's Eco-map, batteries collecting campaign, Iași-Recycle Campaign, 7 hills on 2 wheels campaign that encourages the use of bicycle among the citizens, Water without Plastic and consultative meetings with citizens from different districts.

Figure 4. Posters of projects initiated by MaiBine NGO in Iași



Source: www.maibine.eu

Conclusions

In the last decades, international and local organizations were created in order to prevent, control or manage our society's actions. From local to international, authorities are subordinated one to another in order to create a so called "chain" of information regarding different environmental problems. Usually, the principle of subsidiarity is applied for every community, as it is recommended that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen level. All data that are obtained at local level are collected from more countries and are used in international reports, leaflets, maps or graphics. Nowadays, because of the internet existence, the information varies greatly and it is offered to people all around the world. Each summit has its own webpage, with specific goals, actions and participants. Institutions got them activity more transparent with publishing annual activity reports and funding directions. There is made a huge effort of the United Nations to gain voluntary commitments from countries in order to adopt different environmental acts regarding chemicals trade, control of pollutants or monitoring of the industrial activities. In Iași, Local Environment Protection Agency has the main role in informing the citizens about the quality of environmental factors. Usually, the activities of the Agency has as a target group the children from schools, while local NGO's have a diverse target group, depending on the project and are more visible in the field of social responsibility and civic involvement.

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