Better Access to Justice in Western Balkan Countries

The REC played a major role in developing the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), and since 2011 has provided assistance on its implementation in South Eastern Europe (SEE), with financial support from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety through the Advisory Assistance Programme for Environmental Protection in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.
OBJECTIVES
The overall project goal is to provide targeted support to the selected Aarhus Convention parties, and to stakeholders in the SEE region, to further reduce the gaps in relation to access to justice under the convention.

As a major capacity-building provider for Aarhus Convention implementation, the REC works with various stakeholders, including governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), the judiciary, public interest lawyers and other legal professionals. The project aims to increase knowledge and awareness of access to justice in environmental matters and to enable CSOs to gain the necessary skills to enforce their rights.

The project focuses on five SEE countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) that are parties to the Aarhus Convention. It also includes Kosovo*, where interest has been shown and efforts made to implement the principles of the Aarhus Convention in legislation and practice.

ACTIVITIES
The project comprises four key activities:

- Support to civil society through the development of guidance materials and the provision of targeted trainings. The guidance materials present CSO rights and opportunities, as well as avenues for access to justice according to the Aarhus Convention and the national legislation of the beneficiary countries. Problematic cases are presented and used in the trainings in the form of case studies.

- Training for judges, in the form of interactive two-day events with input from public interest lawyers and other experts, including CSOs. The trainings enhance cooperation with judicial training centres and magistrates' schools, with the aim of introducing issues related to environmental legislation and the Aarhus Convention as part of their official curricula.

- A comparative study for SEE to raise awareness and facilitate national multistakeholder dialogue with the aim of removing barriers to access to justice in environmental matters.

- Access to Justice, Access for All, an activity that informed the Aarhus Convention community on the results achieved within Aarhus-related projects supported by Germany through discussions during the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention in September 2017. The aim was to give an overview of different strategies and experiences in relation to the convention.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.