**Aarhus Convention | 9th meeting of the Task Force on Access to Information | Geneva, 7-8 November 2024**

Thank you for the flour. At the moment, Armenia is in the final stage of discussions about new draft law on public information. This document is developed to improve open data management and accesshe in our country.

In this context, it is important to refer to the "Updated Recommendations on the More Effective Use of Electronic Information Tools" to identify key issues in using electronic platforms. This is a right moment not only to discuss these challenges but also to take meaningful institutional steps toward resolving them.

Over the next few minutes, I will share the observations from Freedom of Information Center of Armenia, and my colleagues from Eco forum “Khazer” NGO and “Sona-Dalma” foundation.

In April, when our organization was conducted study on journalists’ access to information in Armenia, we discovered some unexpected data: it turned out that only 13% of journalists use e-request, the unified platform for online requests.

Research and observations from professional communities indicated the following reasons:

* Lack of awareness
* Lack of toolkit for feedback
* Lack of trust
* Lack of participation during the development phase
* Lack of initiatives that encourage application
* Emphasis on the human factor
* Lack of a promotion strategy

We already had several meetings with the interested parties on this topic. Today I do not want to talk about a specific instrument, but to focus on general challenges affecting all electronic tools. I believe that in the process of systemic changes, it is also necessary to record the general trends.

There are numerous useful digital tools operating in our country, which my colleague will discuss later․ I’ll focus on key challenges:

1. The government is generally open for collaboration with local and international organizations to create new platforms during various programs. But after the funding for these programs ends, government has no ownership to make efforts ensure the site's functionality, update the data, or modernize its features, and it logical. Some of these CSO made platforms, like ecolex.am, simply stop operating. It is very important to realize that maintaining existing platforms can be more cost-effective for the government than creating and promoting new ones, especially when the platforms are already recognized by professional communities and/or the public.

2. There are no mechanisms for monitoring and coordinating the content of non-governmental websites that provide thematic information. As a result, large and small sectorial organizations can generate and disseminate information that does not align with official sources.

3. In some cases, ready-made electronic tools are replaced by processes that involve human factors. In this regard, some representatives of the professional community believe that the issues is more result of lack of political will and systematic approaches than from financial or technical problems.

4. Some electronic tools, like Datalex, experience technical errors nearly once a month. I just checked Facebook, where journalists are discussing the issue. As we know the platform is under the upgrading, but the users are not aware of it and having problems very often don’t sure will have access to the data any time they need.

5. Although many electronic platforms have effective tools, their texts are not adapted for the relevant target groups. Complex and technical jargon, very formal language, in context of a lack of digital literacy make these tolls almost unusable for many groups.

6. In certain cases, mechanisms for data collecting is not comparable in electronic platforms managed by state institutions. For instance, air pollution data published by the Yerevan Municipality and the Ministry of Environment’s Hydrometeorology and Monitoring Center conflict with each other. As a result this open data is available to both citizens and the professional community, but there are no clear tools to verify the accuracy of these sources. It is important to note that each state institution relies on data generated by its own platform for decision-making.

7. The other problem is that although some effective electronic tools for data collection and analysis have been partially institutionalized within specific government agencies, their data is not accessible to other government bodies or the professional community. Additionally, when new data is generated, the data needs of all stakeholders are not considered. So we have platforms/tools that serve only specific purposes but could otherwise be valuable resources for decision-making across other agencies and sectors.

8. The openness of environmental information does not ensure its accessibility. Today, even on the Ministry of Environment's website, there are numerous documents presented in formats that do not allow effective interaction with the data. The Government promise that new law will change the standards and tools. However, experience shows that, in addition to developing tools in line with standards, we also need to provide skills, knowledge, and abilities to properly manage the content of such websites. And finally to change the practice we need also to change the culture.

9. The other problem is that although the Ministry of High-Tech Industry of the Republic of Armenia has developed the Armenian Digital Service Design Standard including Standards for accessibility, a the adaptation of the websites to these standards is on the first stage.

11. In some cases, limited use of tools is also due to the lack of awareness and motivation among the state bodies using them. When a state officer using the tool does not fully understand its capabilities or recognize its benefits, both for the public and for themselves as employees, updating the platform becomes an added burden. Proper training, testing platforms with active employee, and incorporating their feedback can improve the situation. This approach should apply to the development and management of all tools and platforms in general.

12. Some electronic tools communicate with citizens through identity verification, such as registration or electronic signatures. These requirements often discourage journalists and the public, especially in the context of low digital literacy and limited virtual participation, reducing the tools' effectiveness. It is essential to conduct extensive awareness-raising efforts, as even professional organizations and journalists often view these requirements as unnecessary bureaucracy, while, in most cases, they are implemented for cybersecurity purposes

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And now, here’s a brief summary of the recommendations, which you’ll have the opportunity to review in detail later.

Overall recommendations

* We should integrate tools for ensuring access to necessary information, as well as initiatives related to electronic tools, into the agenda of long-term international programs and government initiatives conducted in close collaboration with the government. This will help save resources and align ongoing processes with the format and content recommended by the related conventions.
* Developing and launching platforms within sectorial international programs should be aligned with strategies and protocols developed or endorsed by the Government. In the absence of such frameworks, it is essential to plan actions that support their establishment or, at the very least, to find technical solutions that enable the swift adaptation of platforms to new technological developments or standards.
* In the context of launching electronic platforms and tools, it is essential to develop a dedicated strategy for their dissemination and for promoting their use among stakeholders. Engagement with target groups and the broader public should be considered a key indicator of the effectiveness of electronic tools.
* Regular evaluation of platform usage and effectiveness should be an integral part of platform management. At the same time, it is important that assessments are conducted by independent working groups that include technical and communications specialists, as well as sectorial experts. Each member would evaluate the tools from their professional perspective.
* The website of the Ministry of Environment is currently under renovation, with the support of the Information Systems Agency of Armenia, it is being adapted to the new standards. We think we should be more proactive at this stage. It is a good opportunity for CSOs and the professional community to provide expert evaluations of the content and technical aspects of the information on the official website, and to make observations and see that they are integrated into a new version of the website, creating a good precedent for dialogue and cooperation to make the development stage of professional platforms more inclusive.
* A working group should be formed to map and assess the effectiveness of sector-specific electronic platforms and tools. The results could significantly impact government-led changes. Including field experts and CSO representatives, alongside state structures, is essential. At this stage, the professional community can also take a proactive role by reaching out to organizations currently working in communication or focused on the optimization and transformation of electronic platforms and data.

Dear colleagues we are in the intensive transformation process. Naturally, we face challenges, but it is also about opportunities. We have sufficient professional resources in the form of CSOs, who should be actively involved in this process and are ready to support the government in implementing these important changes.

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