



The right to know

In a democratic society, people have the right of access to environmental information. However, for many years environmental conditions and the environmental impacts of various human activities were kept secret. In the USSR and other Central and Eastern European countries, for example, the public had limited access to information. Documents that were stamped “Not for Printing”, “State Secret” or “Confidential” were only accessible with special permission from specific organisations or institutions. Today, legislation in many European countries guarantees the public the right to obtain access to such information. In fact, governments are responsible for making such information easy to access. In Belarus, the right of free access to information is guaranteed by the Constitution. The Aarhus Convention has been signed by Belarus and entered into force in 2001.

Read through the case study below and discuss the situation it describes.



Case study: Allergies and environmental pollution

Mr. Petrov is a teacher in a small town on the country's border. His school is located close to a chemicals factory. He is head of the school's environmental club and has carefully observed the health of his students over many years.

“After close observation, I gradually discovered a relationship between the allergic reactions experienced by my students and the pollution caused by the nearby chemicals factory. There are rumours that the factory's activities may soon be expanded, and members of the local population are seriously concerned. I would like to help, but in order to reach more accurate conclusions I need to know more about the emissions from the factory and their concentrations. For this, I need access to the relevant information. There is another factory in the neighbouring country, just across the border, and its activities also have an impact on our town. I need up-to-date information about the pollution from this factory, too. However, I have been told that I cannot obtain such information because I am a foreigner. I cannot understand what my nationality has to do with it when the pollution is not confined by borders...”



It is important to know that the local authorities are obliged to provide Mr. Petrov with all available information about the nature and quantity of the factory's emissions within a period of 10 days to two months (depending on the complexity of the issue). If the municipal authorities do not have this information, they are obliged to refer him to other institutions that do. There are, of course, several exceptions, the main one being if the information requested has a bearing on national security or foreign affairs. In any case, Mr. Petrov is entitled to a response and an explanation, and if he is dissatisfied with the response of the authorities he may take the matter to court.

Local authorities are also obliged to collect environmental information in order to protect people's health. They must disseminate this information in a timely manner through the local mass media. The publishing of environmental information in newsletters or daily broadcasts should be regular practice on the part of local and national authorities.

With respect to information from a neighbouring country, the Aarhus Convention guarantees the right of access to this data, assuming that both countries have signed the convention. The convention prohibits discrimination against people or organisations according to citizenship, nationality or place of residence.