# **Free Access to Information and Environmental Protection in the Digital Age: The Experience of North Macedonia**

**Introduction**

Free access to information has long been recognized as a basic prerequisite for transparency and accountability of institutions. But its importance is especially emphasized in the field of environmental protection, where timely data can literally save lives and prevent irreparable damage. In the digital age, access to environmental information assumes a new significance: technology enables wider availability, faster data exchange, and increased public participation.

North Macedonia, as a signatory to the Aarhus Convention and a candidate country for European Union membership, is working to harmonize its legislation and practices with European standards. The law on free access to public information serves as the basis for exercising this right, and digitization opens up new opportunities for its effective application.

**The legal framework in the digital context**

The Republic of North Macedonia, through the Law on Free Access to Public Information ("Official Gazette of RNM" No. 101/2019), established a solid legal basis for access to environmental information. This law, especially in article 3, paragraph 1, paragraph 7, points 4, 5, and 6, recognizes the key role of information in:

* Prevention and detection of serious threats to health and life - digital platforms enable real-time reporting of air or water pollution risks
* Detection of environmental threats - digital monitoring systems can detect illegal activities such as illegal dumping of toxic waste
* Supporting public debate - digital channels enable a wider and more accessible public discussion on environmental policies

**Digitization as a new tool for transparency**

Today, in several countries, including in North Macedonia, citizens can access online data on air quality, the state of water resources, or waste management. Interactive maps, public registries, and mobile applications enable the real-time monitoring of environmental parameters.
In Skopje, where air pollution is a chronic issue, the platform <https://air.moepp.gov.mk/> provides measurements from multiple locations, making it a key source of information for the public, media, and civil society organizations. The mobile application is also part of digitalization <https://mojvozduh.eu/web/>, which exceeded the borders of North Macedonia and is known worldwide as AirCare. It works by using open air quality data from government, volunteer, and satellite measuring stations. At the local level, several municipalities have begun publishing information about illegal landfills and the state of green areas, allowing citizens to participate in monitoring through the platform. <https://mzaednica.mk/>.

These examples demonstrate that digitalization can enhance trust in institutions and promote public oversight.

**Challenges and limitations**

Despite progress, challenges remain serious:

- Unavailable or outdated data: Many institutions do not publish the information in a timely manner, and some of them are not in a machine-readable format.
- Political and economic pressures: sensitive data on industrial pollutants are often difficult to access.

- Limited capacities for implementation: The lack of trained staff and appropriate technical equipment is often an obstacle to consistent monitoring and systematic digitization of information.

- Low public awareness: Some citizens still do not use their right to access information, which reduces the possibility of public pressure and participation in creating public policies.

These weaknesses indicate that laws and digital tools must be complemented by ongoing investments in resources, training of officials, and education of the public, as well as technological advancements.

**Potential directions for promotion**

For North Macedonia, digitization can be a driver of a stable and inclusive system for access to information. A few concrete steps would be:

- creation of a central portal for open environmental data, which will integrate information from all institutions,

- development of mobile applications for citizens that will enable the reporting of environmental problems (wild dumps, illegal logging, pollution),
- Active participation of citizens: By being involved in the process of collecting and exchanging information, citizens can directly contribute to the monitoring of environmental conditions.

- enhanced cooperation with the media and investigative journalists, who are key in exposing cases of violations of environmental standards,
- constant support for civil society organizations working in the field of environmental protection.

**Conclusion**

Access to information about the environment in the digital age is not only a legal obligation but also a practical tool for protecting health and improving the quality of life. North Macedonia has made significant strides, but challenges persist in terms of data consistency, political influence, and low public awareness.

Experience shows that when data is public and easily accessible, it becomes a catalyst for positive change – fueling public debates, inspiring activism, improving the accountability of institutions, and opening space for innovation in the "green economy".

The key to future success lies in the readiness of institutions to harness digital potential for greater transparency and create a system that protects the environment, regardless of political changes. Thus, access to information will become an essential instrument for democracy, health, and sustainable development

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