

Statement

by

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at

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sanitation and hygiene for all”**

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen;

Welcome to this information briefing on the Protocol on Water and Health and a warm thank you to Belarus and Switzerland for their leadership in organizing it.

Water, sanitation and hygiene are indispensable for our daily lives. From drinking, to cooking, to flushing the toilet, many actions that we carry out every day rely on them.

In recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized to what extent water, sanitation and hygiene are key for human health. Indeed, in the absence of a COVID-19 vaccine, frequent handwashing with soap is a simple, but effective intervention to contain the pandemic.

Despite this, in the UNECE region, over 16 million people still lack access to drinking water and more than 31 million need basic sanitation. Over 3 million children attend schools with no basic sanitation facilities, impacting on the right to education and on gender equality. These numbers are a call to action.

In this context, let me introduce the Protocol on Water and Health.

The history of this instrument began in 1999, when 36 UN Member States came together to sign the Protocol under the auspices of two UN agencies: the UNECE and the WHO Regional Office for Europe. Today, these two organizations share responsibility for servicing the treaty.

The Protocol brings together two “communities”, water and environment, and health. Its objective is to protect human health and well-being through sustainable water management and by preventing, controlling and reducing water-related diseases.

Long before the recognition of water and sanitation as human rights, the Protocol already required its Parties to provide access to drinking water and sanitation for everyone. It also has a special focus on equitable access to water and sanitation, especially for those who suffer disadvantage or social exclusion.

The universality and equity dimensions were pioneering, as was the focus on prevention and the safety of water and sanitation services. In many ways, the Protocol was a precursor to Sustainable Development Goal 6.

In the UNECE region, the Protocol serves as a hub for technical and policy developments on water, sanitation, hygiene and health. It helps countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in realizing the

human rights to water and sanitation. Between 2000 and 2017, work under the Protocol has contributed to 63 million people gaining access to drinking water and 84 million to sanitation services in the region.

However, numerous challenges remain. Although many countries are better in providing access to water and sanitation and improving water quality, these achievements do not always reach rural areas, or vulnerable and marginalized groups such as homeless people, residents of informal settlements or nomadic populations that are at risk of being left behind.

In this context, what can the Protocol bring to the table? I will answer this question by focusing on three examples.

First, in the context of COVID-19, the Protocol is a useful instrument to advance action on water, sanitation, hygiene and health. For instance, it supports countries in ensuring that adequate hygiene practices are carried out in all settings, including schools and health-care facilities. This can go a long way in containing and preventing infection.

The Protocol also offers tools and guidance documents that can support the recovery phase and help increase future preparedness against diseases.

Amongst these, a methodology has been developed under the Protocol that allows countries to assess the equity of access to water and sanitation through disaggregated data collection. Based on this, policymakers can improve the situation of the most vulnerable and marginalized, who were also those hit hardest by the pandemic. The methodology has already been applied by 12 countries in the UNECE region and it has led to concrete impacts, such as changes in national legislation and improvements in water and sanitation infrastructure.

Second: Many of you may have experience in dealing with authorities responsible for water, sanitation and hygiene. You may have seen that these are often scattered among sectors. Therefore, cooperation is key to advance action. The Protocol supports countries in establishing national mechanisms that facilitate such cooperation. It also promotes intersectoral cooperation internationally, by bringing together public officials and experts working on water, environment, sanitation, hygiene and health from across the UNECE region.

Third: The Protocol supports countries in developing concrete national objectives through a target setting mechanism. Over 30 countries have set targets under the Protocol, they monitor them through indicators and report on progress to the Protocol bodies. Even countries that are not Parties to the Protocol submit reports on a voluntary basis. The target-setting mechanism is interlinked with the

implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as countries often set joint or coordinated targets under the Protocol and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The results achieved so far were only possible thanks to the commitment and support of countries which have led activities and contributed to the Protocol's trust funds. I warmly thank all of them.

I hope that, with these examples, I have given you a useful insight on the Protocol. I also look forward to hearing more later today about concrete country experiences in applying the Protocol. This information can be beneficial for all UNECE Member States, whether they are Parties to the Protocol or not. Indeed, the Protocol community comprises 27 Parties, but over 40 countries work under its framework and benefit from the Protocol tools and capacity building activities. At least 7 countries are preparing accession; I call on them to complete the process and I hope that other countries will follow.

In addition to this increasing membership and interest over the last years, the Protocol's mandate was extended. Parties decided to expand the scope of activities to link them with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and other international commitments on water and health. They have also introduced a new sub-area of work, exclusively dedicated to increasing climate resilience. As a result, the Protocol secretariat receives a growing number of requests for support, and the resources available are insufficient to implement the programme of work.

This is why, when meeting in Belgrade last year, the Parties decided to request the UN Secretary General to increase regular budget support to the UNECE secretariat. At the moment, there is only a maximum of 30% of regular budget staff at P-4 level to service the Protocol within UNECE. Therefore, the support that can be given to countries is limited. As a follow-up to this request, we are organizing this event today, where I want to make an important call.

I call on all countries which can benefit from the Protocol, be they Parties, countries in the process of accession, or countries that recognize the importance of water, sanitation and hygiene, to support the request for additional regular budget resources to the UNECE secretariat. I will personally advocate for this during budget discussions. But first and foremost, I need your proactive support at the relevant discussions during the upcoming meeting of the UNECE Executive Committee this December, the Commission session in April 2021 and at ECOSOC discussions later in New York.

I am confident that this briefing will highlight some of the benefits that you could reap if the Protocol had adequate resources at its disposal.

I wish you all a very fruitful exchange.

Thank you.