



**Second session of the Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE/WHO-EURO
PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH
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Opening remarks by Mr. Andrey Vasilyev, Deputy Executive Secretary,
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Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to address this second session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health.

First of all, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Government of Romania for the political leadership displayed under the Protocol, its support in the organization of this meeting and for the warm welcome in Bucharest, in this unique venue. I would like to pay tribute to Excellency László Borbély, Minister of Environment and Forests, Excellency Attila Cseke, Minister of Health, and to their able team.

This meeting provides an important opportunity to review progress achieved and to reflect on successes and obstacles and on the impact that the Protocol is having across the UNECE region.

Three years ago, at their first meeting, Parties decided to turn the concept of the Protocol into action. A broad programme of work was adopted, concrete measures were planned and implementing bodies established. The ideas and approaches set out in the text of the Protocol began to materialize.

And these past three years have been dense in events and achievements. More Parties have joined the Protocol and, more importantly, many countries are in the process of accession or ratification.

Several guidance documents have been developed and will be tabled in the coming days for formal adoption. These will provide strategic and practical support to Parties in complying with the two main obligations of the Protocol: to set targets and target dates, assess progress and report; and to develop systems for the surveillance of and response to water-related disease. In that connection, it is noteworthy that the Guidelines on the Setting of Targets, Evaluation of Progress and Reporting are already in use in several countries and have proved their soundness and usefulness.

Parties have demonstrated vision recognizing that emerging issues such as extreme weather events and the impact of climate change — even if not specifically spelled out in the Protocol — will have important consequences in the achievement of the Protocol's objectives, namely, access to safe water and adequate sanitation for all. Thus, the Guidance on Water Supply and Sanitation in Extreme Weather Events is a timely response to a growing concern.

Moreover, by looking at the issue of small-scale water supplies and by deciding to deal in the future with small-scale sanitation systems as well, Parties have shown their willingness to respond to difficult problems which are often not adequately addressed at the national level. The work carried out under the Protocol contributes to raising both political and technical awareness on this issue and to building capacity throughout the region.

Another main achievement of the past three years has been the Ad Hoc Project Facilitation Mechanism, the Protocol system for mutual assistance and for coordination of donor action. The Mechanism has shown its potential for promoting action on the ground and triggering partnerships between donor and recipient countries. The growing number of requests for assistance shows the need for continuation and further development of this initiative. I therefore encourage more donor countries to take advantage of the Mechanism within their bilateral assistance policies. As demonstrated in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the benefits extend far beyond the single assistance project.

A further important result is linked to the work on access to information and public participation. This has not only responded to a common challenge for most Parties to involve the public in the implementation of the Protocol, but has also built a broader awareness among civil society. As a result, actions by local and international non-governmental organizations linked to the Protocol have proliferated. This is a very positive development as civil society has a fundamental role to play in implementation. I therefore applaud the proposed partnership with the UNECE Convention on

Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, also known as the Aarhus Convention.

Finally it is important to recognize that the Protocol is closely linked to the broader political context. The recent resolution of the United Nations General Assembly declaring that access to clean water and sanitation is a human right, and the following decision of the Human Rights Council affirming this right, are great political opportunities to boost action in these areas. The Protocol on Water and Health embodies the close linkages between human rights, health, environmental protection and sustainable development. I would say more — the Protocol is the only international legal tool to translate the human right to water and sanitation into practice. In this regard, the planned activities on equitable access to water are very much needed to tackle the burning issues of water affordability and problems of access in rural areas.

Taking stock of all that has been done, one can say that, to a large extent, this has been a pioneering work at both the international and national levels. The innovative approach of the Protocol forces governmental institutions working on health **or** water issues to come out of their institutional boxes and to tackle “water and health” together and in a holistic manner. Even more challenging, the Protocol requires the water and health sectors to reach out to other sectors, such as investments, infrastructure, agriculture, energy, rural development, tourism and development cooperation, to mention a few.

These are not easy tasks and unfortunately the current situation is far from perfect. It is well known that there is a high burden of water-related disease and that universal access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation remains unrealized in many countries of the European region. Even worse, some countries are actually stagnating or regressing instead of progressing towards the Millennium Development Goal to halve the proportion of the population without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. I will not dwell more on this here, as my colleague Srdan Matic from WHO-EURO will address these issues in more detail.

The results of the first reporting exercise under the Protocol draw a mixed picture of the situation in the region. Several countries are very much taking advantage of the approach of the Protocol to promote harmonization and rationalization of sectoral policies. At the same time, many are still lagging behind, either having yet to set their targets or having bypassed the Protocol’s holistic approach and still only relying on existing sectoral policies.

It is a very positive sign that, to respond to the existing challenges brought to light by the reporting exercise, the Compliance Committee has decided to intensify its facilitating and supporting role to assist Parties in difficulty.

Of course the level of implementation of the Protocol is closely linked to the social, economic and environmental context: the same broad inequalities existing in the region are reflected in the Protocol's implementation. At the same time, the Protocol is a powerful tool to address and reduce these inequalities. Obviously, the issues of water and health and environmental sustainability are cornerstones of sustainable development. Moreover, the same structure of work under the Protocol aims to reduce gaps between the most advanced and the less advanced countries, promoting collective approaches, exchange of experience, transfer of knowledge and mutual assistance. This is one of the biggest strengths of the Protocol which differentiates it from many other existing initiatives.

And this points us to the other objective of this meeting, which is to plan future developments. And it is obvious that the next three years will be crucial to keep the momentum and to consolidate progress achieved.

The programme of work that you will adopt will set the Protocol's future direction and your response to the existing challenges; it should support concrete results to show that the Protocol can make a real difference. The proposal you have in front of you is very comprehensive and ambitious and I would like to emphasize a number of its important features.

First of all, it is positive to see that the programme of work reflects your continuing commitment to strengthening the pillars of the Protocol: setting targets and target dates, surveillance, compliance, mutual assistance and cross-cutting issues. Secondly, it should be appreciated that the programme of work is a coherent framework in which the different activities mutually reinforce each other, where action at the national, subregional and regional levels ensures continuous progress, and where capacity development and action on the ground prevail. Thirdly, the programme of work recognizes the importance of acting outside the water and health "boxes" to have stronger political and tangible impact. This will also be important in relation to the Seventh "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference, to be held in Astana in 2011, as one of the two themes of the Conference will be the sustainable management of water and water-related ecosystems. The Protocol obviously has a significant role to play in the Conference's preparations, and the

Protocol's capacity to link with different partners and other policy sectors will be important in this regard.

At the same time, the programme of work needs to be realistic, achievable and supported by adequate resources to ensure its implementation. I would like to stress the need to match the programme of work with adequate resources to carry it out. In order to maintain progress in implementation, deliver assistance and provide a platform for exchanging countries' experiences, we do need substantial financial contributions to both the UNECE and WHO-EURO Trust Funds.

I can ensure you that, for its part, UNECE will maintain its support to the Protocol from its regular budget including its staff time as well as the provision of conference services for most of the meetings under the Protocol. However, extrabudgetary resources are needed if UNECE is to continue servicing the Protocol's bodies (the Bureau, the Working Group on Water and Health, the Task Force on Indicators and Reporting and the Compliance Committee), as well as developing and implementing capacity-building activities.

Building on the experience of the past three years there are a number of conclusions that can be drawn. First of all, Parties have been generous in supporting the Protocol, with contributions totalling more than \$1.5 million. Looking at the amount of work done, at both the national and international levels, the number of documents and publications elaborated, the capacity-building activities and the assistance provided directly to countries, I do, sincerely, believe that it was money well spent.

I take this opportunity to thank the Parties and non-Parties — namely Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Romania and Switzerland — that have made all the above possible, not only by offering financial contributions but also by leading activities. Nevertheless, it is certainly a concern that not all Parties are contributing and that the burden is not fairly shared.

The past three years have also shown the risks of embarking on a programme of work without the necessary resources at the outset. After the first meeting of the Parties, as there were no funds available to begin the work and no staff to service the Parties, activities only started after almost a one-year delay. The secretariat had to invest a lot of its time and effort in fund-raising, time which should rather have been spent in supporting and realizing the activities themselves. Moreover, the

secretariat has been stretched beyond its capacity, with staff working under conditions of contractual insecurity that are simply not acceptable any more.

Unfortunately, the current funding situation is frightfully similar to what we had in 2007, with empty accounts, very high ambitions and a low level of financial commitment.

I know that, to put it mildly, the financial situation across the region is not easy. Austerity measures have been sweeping across Europe and Governments struggle with budget deficits.

But I also know that “where there is a will there is a way”. Our host country, Romania, is a good example of that: it is the third main contributor to the Protocol and has been able to pool resources for an issue which is crucial for it at the national level. I am therefore confident that you will be able to match the resources needs of the programme of work provided the adoption of the programme of work reflects a political commitment to it.

Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you success in your deliberations. Thank you