



# UNECE Weekly

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## UNECE/WHO Protocol on Water and Health enters into force

On 4 August 2005, the Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention), adopted in June 1999, will enter into force. One of its greatest challenges is to provide safe drinking water and adequate sanitation to all people in the region, including the vulnerable, the disadvantaged and the socially excluded.



### “Medieval” diseases lurking in the water supplies

Even though most Europeans take clean water for granted nowadays, too many people are still without a regular supply of safe water. Cholera, bacillary dysentery, typhoid fever, hepatitis A and malaria are water-related diseases often associated with developing countries, some of them perhaps with medieval Europe. Yet at the beginning of the third millennium, lack of access to safe drinking water, poor sanitation and

Of the roughly 877 million people in Europe and Central Asia, almost 140 million (16%) do not have a household connection to a drinking-water supply, 85 million (10%) do not have improved sanitation and over 41 million (5%) do not have access to a safe drinking-water supply.

With 59.2% of the rural population lacking access to a household drinking-water connection, the conditions are comparable to the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean (58%).

With an average of 45.6% of the rural population lacking access to improved sanitation, the conditions in a group of countries – including Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are comparable to those in North Africa, where an average of 43% of the population lack access.

And a recent estimate of mortality from diarrhoeal disease attributable to poor water, sanitation and hygiene, showed that 13,500 deaths a year of children under 14 years of age in Europe and Central Asia are due to poor water conditions. The largest contribution to this burden, with over 11,000 deaths, comes from the above-mentioned countries



inadequate management practices are at the root of these diseases and they still threaten the health of millions of people, most prominently in countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

## Despite water stress, water is wasted

The critical situation regarding water stress and wastage of water rarely hits the headlines: 31% of Europe's population lives in countries that experience high water stress. About 60% of the European cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (or a total of 140 million people) are now supplied with water from overexploited groundwater resources. Despite this critical situation, in some large cities in Central and Eastern Europe, almost half the drinking water that leaves the water purification plants is lost in the pipeline system. Some European cities have even reported leakages of 70 to 80%.

## What steps are Governments taking to counter this problem?

Lack of access to safe water supply and sanitation not only threatens public health but also hampers social and economic development. This social challenge is embedded in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. The Protocol will provide a roadmap to Governments in their efforts to reach this target.

But the Protocol provisions go beyond the MDGs and aim to ensure access to drinking water and provision of sanitation to everyone. This right to water is coupled in the Protocol with the

obligation of all concerned actors to protect the water environment and to conserve water resources.

By being Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health, Governments take a holistic approach towards achieving these goals. Within the overall framework of integrated water management, they shall protect the source of water supply, safeguard a high standard of performance of water treatment and supply systems, and properly treat resulting wastewaters. The Protocol equally applies to rivers, lakes and groundwaters. Parties will periodically review progress under the Protocol.

Ukraine, one of the Protocol Parties, has already passed a law to specify national and local action in the water and health sector up to 2030. Within two years, other Parties will set targets and target dates for the Protocol's implementation.

## What is the role of other stakeholders?

It is not only national Governments that have a role to play in water supply and sanitation issues. The Protocol recognizes the importance of other actors such as the scientific community, NGOs and the private sector, which will be strongly involved in the activities under the Protocol. Thus, the Protocol requires Parties to develop public awareness campaigns, encourage education, training and research, and inform the public.

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The secretariat functions for the Protocol are carried out jointly by UNECE and the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization. Please contact Rainer Enderlein ([rainer.enderlein@unece.org](mailto:rainer.enderlein@unece.org)) and Francesca Bernardini ([francesca.bernardini@unece.org](mailto:francesca.bernardini@unece.org)) or Roger Aertgeerts ([rae@ecr.euro.who.int](mailto:rae@ecr.euro.who.int)) and Hiroko Takasawa ([hta@ecr.euro.who.int](mailto:hta@ecr.euro.who.int)). See also [www.euro.who.int/watsan](http://www.euro.who.int/watsan), Protocol on water and health.

The main aim of the Protocol is to protect human health and well being by better water management, including the protection of water ecosystems, and by preventing, controlling and reducing water-related diseases. The Protocol is the first international agreement of its kind adopted specifically to attain an adequate supply of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone, and effectively protect water used as a source of drinking water.

To meet these goals, its Parties are required to establish national and local targets for the quality of drinking water and the quality of discharges, as well as for the performance of water supply and wastewater treatment. They are also required to reduce outbreaks and the incidence of water-related diseases.

This Protocol introduces a social component into cooperation on water management. Water resources management should link social and economic development to the protection of natural ecosystems. Moreover, improving the water supply and sanitation is fundamental in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

### For further information please contact:

**Information Service,  
UN Economic Commission  
for Europe (UNECE)  
CH - 1211 Geneva 10,  
Switzerland**

**Tel: +41(0)22 917 44 44**

**Fax: +41(0)22 917 05 05**

**E-mail:**

**[info.ece@unece.org](mailto:info.ece@unece.org)**

**Website:**

**<http://www.unece.org>**