



# UNECE Weekly

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

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## It's just happened ...

### Effects of air pollution



The *Working Group on Effects of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution*, holding its 24th session on 31 August-3 September, reviewed the work of its six International Cooperative Programmes and the Joint Task Force (with WHO) on the Health Aspects of Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution.

New data sets on critical loads, values describing the tolerance of ecosystems to resist long-term pollutant load without harmful effects, were presented and recommended for use in the Convention's work. The new data covered acidification, eutrophication, heavy metals (lead, cadmium and mercury) and, as a new feature, target loads for acidification that take into account the time lag of ecosystems to acidify and/or recover. The data are available for use in forthcoming revisions of the three most recent Protocols to the Convention.



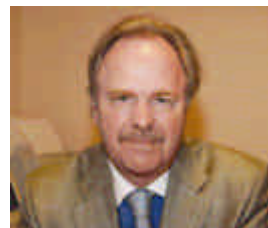
First modelling results on the effects of climate change on recovery of acidified freshwaters revealed that both climate change scenarios

and site-specific characteristics significantly affected the rate of recovery of the ecosystem. Several new dose-response functions were reported on material corrosion, emphasizing the relatively large effect of nitric acid in the air. Risk maps of UNESCO's cultural heritage objects on corrosion due to sulphur concentrations in Europe indicated potential threats especially in Central and Southern Europe.

Several Parties from Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) reported on their current activities relating to air pollution effects. The Working Group noted that guidance material and training in monitoring and mapping would help build capacity to improved participation in Convention activities and to

## Question of the week ...

to Kaj Bärlund, Director of the UNECE Environment and Human Settlements Division



*Could floods like the ones that just occurred in the US happen in Europe?*

Over the last few years there have been severe floods in Europe. Recently floods have hit

Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Austria, Switzerland and caused dozens of deaths and enormous material damage. It means that even though the scale is not the same, the problem is here as well.

What we have to remember is that some parts of Europe are densely populated and are situated below sea level and close to big lakes and rivers. These are of course risk zones. In the Netherlands for example in 1953, the floods came in the night without warning, a fateful combination of freak high tides and gale-force winds that killed 1,835 people. Almost 200,000 hectares of land were swamped, 3,000 homes and 300 farms destroyed, and 47,000 heads of cattle drowned. It was the Netherlands' worst disaster for 300 years.

One of the impacts of climate change is predicted to be rising sea levels and more extreme weather conditions. These together over time will almost certainly create flooding that will be worse than what we have seen so far. We have to prepare ourselves for it. Activities in this area are being planned under the UNECE Water Convention, and will be discussed at its next meeting. ♦

implement the Convention and its more recent protocols.

Documents are available at the website: <http://www.unece.org/env/wge/documents.htm>. For more information, contact: [matti.johansson@unece.org](mailto:matti.johansson@unece.org). ♦

Not an official record - For information only

## Coming up soon ...

### Poverty increasing in the UNECE region

One of the key issues expected to be addressed by Heads of State at UN Headquarters on 14-16 September is the state of implementation of the goals contained in the Millennium Declaration. The UNECE has prepared a report on this issue. The most challenging goal is poverty reduction (MDG 1).

Available data indicate that relative poverty has increased in several countries of Western Europe and North America. This increase is indicative of a potentially worrying evolution of income distribution. In fact, it appears that income distribution within countries is becoming more unequal, in the sense

that more people are falling into the lower tail. The overall economic slowdown of the past few years, with an acute recession and a very mild recovery, is likely to be a main factor underlying inequality. Indeed, prolonged downturns of economic activity, often accompanied by an erosion of

social protection, tend to have a particularly strong effect on those who are below the average of income distribution, which results in a greater share of population being at risk of poverty.

In most new EU Member States, relative poverty appears to be fairly stable. In fact, the early years of transition, characterized by falling incomes, witnessed an increase in poverty, but progress on structural and economic reforms eventually put these countries on a path of steady growth, thus limiting the emergence of sharper inequalities in income distribution. The flat trend in poverty observed in the most recent data also reflects the current sustained pace of economic activity, combined with continued reforms on the labour markets.

With the collapse of the centralized economy, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and South East European (SEE) countries experienced

a sharp contraction of economic activities, which also led to increasing poverty. However, poverty data prior to 1995 are scarce and a systematic analysis can only be done starting after the mid 1990s. Based on the available data, an increase in the proportion of people living under national poverty lines can be observed for all the CIS and SEE countries from the mid 1990s to the beginning of the 2000. The major reason for this sharp increase of poverty was the economic collapse of the 1990s triggered by the loss of markets after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

But internal wars and natural disasters have also played a role. The

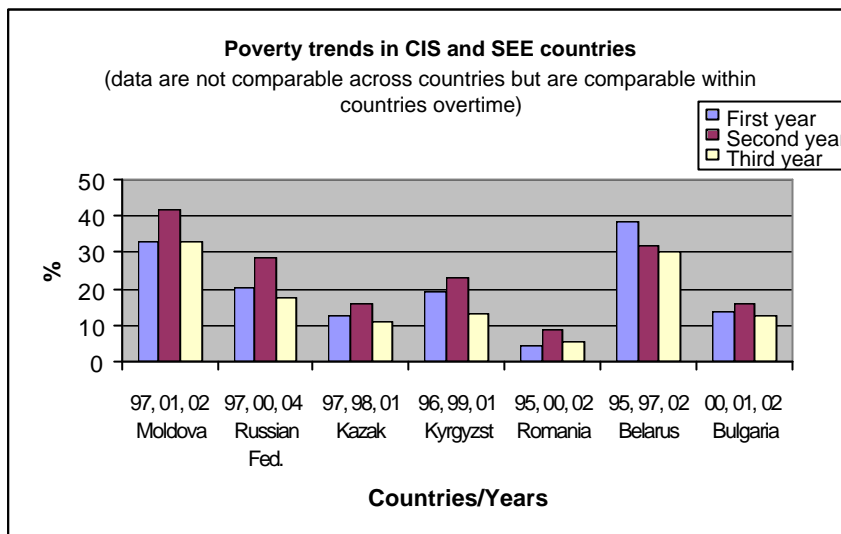
disintegration of the Soviet Union had a serious impact on the water and energy systems of many CIS countries that changed the

environmental and social balance of the region. As a result, an

increasing

number of areas are affected by droughts. The Aral Sea disaster is probably the most visible example of natural disasters in the region where the consequences in terms of poverty and living conditions of people are devastating. In 2001 the regions of Kazakhstan surrounding the Aral Sea experienced a percentage of people living in poverty (46%) that was almost double the national average (28.4%).

Recent data covering the early 2000s however suggest that the poverty trend is stabilising, if not reverting, with poverty declining in most (albeit not all) CIS and SEE economies. To a considerable extent, this general improvement was facilitated by the fast pace of economic growth in the sub-region. In a longer-term perspective, the likelihood that these countries will meet Goal 1 will crucially depend on their ability to strengthen the pro-poor content of economic growth. ♦



#### September

- 12-15 Working Party on Road Traffic Safety
- 13-23 Joint Meeting of the RID Safety Committee and the ECE Working Party on the Transport of Dangerous Goods
- 15-16 Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics
- 16 Workshop on Sustainable Development of Competitive Forest Operations in Europe (Krakow, Poland)

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