



**UNITED NATIONS  
ECONOMIC COMMISSION  
FOR EUROPE**

**WORLD HEALTH  
ORGANIZATION  
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE**

MEETING OF THE PARTIES TO  
THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH  
TO THE CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION  
AND USE OF TRANSBOUNDARY  
WATERCOURSES AND INTERNATIONAL LAKES

Meeting of the Parties  
Third session  
Oslo, 25-27 November 2013  
Item 4 of the provisional agenda

MOP-3/WH/2013/INF.3

**CONCEPT NOTE OF THE SPECIAL SESSION ON EQUITABLE ACCESS TO  
WATER AND SANITATION  
“FAIR AND SMART WAYS TO REACH UNIVERSAL ACCESS”**

**SESSION OBJECTIVES**

- To discuss the progress made in the pan-European region in advancing universal access to safe drinking-water and sanitation;
- To assess to what extent those advances have been equitable;
- To review what needs to be done to ensure that the common goal of universal access is achieved in a fair and smart way;
- To call upon Parties, other States, financial institutions and development agencies for actions and commitments to eliminate disparities in access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

**BACKGROUND**

**Universal access to safe and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation has been adopted as an international goal.** The human right to water and sanitation, recognized in 2010, requires that water and sanitation services are available, accessible, safe, acceptable and affordable for all without discrimination. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup> (Rio de Janeiro, 20–22 June 2012) – Rio+20 – world leaders committed to the progressive realization of the human right to water and sanitation and particularly of access to safe and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation for all. This goes well beyond previous

<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly, Resolution 66/288 The Future We Want, 11 September 2012

commitments made in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the Millennium Declaration regarding halving by 2015 the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. United Nations Member States identified water and sanitation as one of the top three priority areas to be addressed through the future Sustainable Development Goals that should be coherent and coordinated with the post-2015 development agenda<sup>2</sup>.

**The Protocol on Water and Health<sup>3</sup> provides a sound framework for the translation of the human right to water and sanitation into practice in the pan-European region.** The Protocol on Water and Health requires that Parties ensure universal access to water and sanitation, within national targets and time frames tailored to the country's situation and capacity. It also stipulates that "equitable access to water, adequate in terms both of quantity and of quality, should be provided for all members of the population, especially those who suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion". *Health 2020*, the common policy framework for health and well-being for the WHO European region<sup>4</sup>, recognizes that health inequalities are growing within and between countries and aims at "improving health for all and reducing health inequalities". The 2010 Parma Declaration<sup>5</sup> set a target for children as a vulnerable group: "We will strive to provide each child with access to safe water and sanitation in homes, child care centres, kindergartens, schools, health care institutions and public recreational water settings by 2020, and to revitalize hygiene practices."

**Advances in access to water and sanitation are being made but safe drinking water and improved sanitation cannot be taken for granted, even in the pan-European region.** In 2011<sup>6</sup>, 19 million people still do not have access to improved water sources and 67 million people lack access to improved sanitation facilities in the pan-European region. Overall progress in increasing access masks significant disparities within and between the countries, between urban and rural areas, as well as between high and low income groups. Large in-country differences in access are not random – they affect mostly the poor, those belonging to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, and rural populations, regardless of the countries' socioeconomic status. For example, in the Caucasus and Central Asia, 22% of the rural population lacks access to improved drinking-water sources as opposed to only 4% of urban dwellers; more dramatically, 71% of the rural population lacks access to piped water on premises, whereas only 16% of town and city residents are similarly disadvantaged.

**Policies to achieve universal access to water and sanitation need to be fair, but also to be smart.** Extra targeted efforts are needed to develop policies to improve access, addressing those who are most difficult to reach, and who are still left behind. Achieving equitable access means achieving universal access in a fair way, without discrimination or exclusion. If no specific attention is paid to solutions focusing on the difficult to reach, disparities in access are likely to increase and to undermine reaching universal access. Policies need to be smart – smart to favour those areas and population groups that, so far, have been left aside because it is a complex task to reach them. And smart to be cost-effective and affordable for governments – as the financial crisis has put a huge pressure on public budgets in most countries in the region. Above all, prominently addressing the equity dimension in further advancing access to water and sanitation increases the visibility of the problem<sup>7</sup>. This is a necessary pre-requisite for coordinating institutional and policy agendas, fully engaging relevant stakeholders and mobilising targeted financial resources.

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2 UN General Assembly, Initial Input of the Secretary-General to the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.

3 UN Economic and Social Council, Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, done in London, on 17 June 1999. 18 October 1999.

4 WHO Regional Committee for Europe, *Health 2020: a European policy framework supporting action across government and society for health and well-being*, 12 September 2012.

5 WHO Europe, *Parma Declaration on Environment and Health*, 12 March 2010.

6 WHO and UNICEF (2013). *Progress on sanitation and drinking-water - 2013 update*, Geneva.

7 An equitable access score card has been developed under the Protocol on Water and Health as an analytical tool to establish a baseline, discuss further actions to be taken, and evaluate progress in achieving equitable access to water and sanitation through a process of self-assessment.

**Different policy tools to address inequities in access to water and sanitation already exist, and are already implemented in some countries.** Work under the Protocol on Water and Health has identified an array of good practices and lessons learned on policy options and measures to address the different dimensions of equitable access<sup>8</sup>. This work highlighted the crucial need for cross-sectoral collaboration, in particular with authorities and administrations in charge of public finance, regional development, social inclusion and social protection, but also those in charge of education, health or prison facilities. The *Health 2020* policy framework also emphasizes the importance of collaboration: key strategies to address health inequities include setting common objectives and undertaking joint investments between health and other sectors, addressing social inequalities and taking action on social and environmental determinants of health.

## ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- How can the Protocol on Water and Health contribute to reaching universal access to water and sanitation?
- How have national, state and local governments translated the obligation to comply with the human right to water and sanitation into their policies? To what extent has equitable access to water and sanitation become a priority issue for governments in the pan-European region?
- Do countries in the pan-European region, financial institutions and development agencies currently consider equitable access issues in their water, sanitation and health policies and practices? If not, what are the main barriers and what are the plans? How do governments sustainably address the specific needs of the more vulnerable and marginalized groups?
- Is there a need for additional international cooperation and related international supporting work to address the challenge of equitable access, considering the context of financial crisis? If so, what type of work would be most useful?

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<sup>8</sup> UNECE and WHO/Europe (2012). No one left behind – good practices in ensuring equitable access to water and sanitation, Geneva.