

**Protocol on Water and Health to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary
Watercourses and International Lakes**

FIRST MEETING OF THE PARTIES

Geneva, 17–19 January 2007

Opening remarks by Mr. Marek Belka, Executive Secretary,
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here in Geneva and to address this first Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health to the UNECE Water Convention, which is indeed a historic occasion.

The entry into force of the Protocol on Water and Health represents a major step forward in the protection of human health through improved water management. The Protocol is unique among multilateral environmental agreements in the extent to which its objectives crosscut environmental protection and human well-being.

The Protocol on Water Health recognizes that engaging in intersectoral partnerships and increased coordination greatly enhances sustainable development. And it brings many benefits: increased life expectancy at birth, enhanced well-being and economic development, progress in research and understanding, improved education, enhanced international cooperation and greater involvement by civil society in environment and health matters.

The history of the Protocol on Water and Health reaches back more than seven years. In June 1999, at the London Ministerial Conference, health and environment ministers adopted the Protocol, which had been negotiated by experts from both sectors. This marked a new commitment to action in partnership to improve the environment and health in the twenty-first century.

This kind of political commitment is exactly what is needed to overcome the water crisis – a crisis that claims more lives through disease than any war claims through guns. The 1.8 million child deaths each year related to unclean water and poor sanitation dwarf the casualties associated with

violent conflict. But, most important, this is a crisis that can be solved, as the needed finance, technology and capacity can be made available.

As Parties and Signatories to the Protocol, you are showing an exemplary commitment to the goal of providing access to safe water and sanitation to everybody. And you recognize that success in addressing this challenge through a concerted national and international response will act as a catalyst for progress in public health, education and poverty reduction and as a source of economic dynamism.

The Protocol is one of the most advanced multilateral agreements in many respects. It is impressive in its detail and provides clear indications for its implementation. It is extensive in its breadth and far-reaching in its depth. At the same time, it takes into account differences in health, environmental and economic conditions in the region, and it gives Parties the latitude to establish their priorities and to set targets and target dates tailored to their specific situations.

Another noticeable aspect of the Protocol is that, by aiming to ensure access to adequate supplies of wholesome drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone, it provides a sound framework for the realization of the human right to water. The Protocol is thus at the forefront of a human rights-based approach to sustainable development. To further explore the links between the Protocol and the human right to water, I warmly invite you to participate in the *Roundtable on the human right to water and the Protocol on Water and Health* that will take place tomorrow during the lunch break. I also take this opportunity to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for co-organizing the event together with the joint secretariat.

The Protocol entered into force in August 2005, and the interim period saw its early implementation under the leadership of the Government of Hungary, which held the chairship of the Meetings of the Signatories along with that of the Working Group on Water and Health under the mother Convention.

I welcome the fact that many Governments have decided to ratify the Protocol, which now counts 20 ratifications. 18 more signatories have indicated their readiness to ratify the Protocol in the future. We are all aware of the energetic efforts in many capitals to establish the necessary implementing legislation, which reflects a solid commitment to the Protocol.

I hope that well before your second meeting most of the missing countries in the region will also join, in particular countries in South-Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, where the Protocol is most needed.

Distinguished delegates, the decisions that you will take during these days will set the future direction of work under the Protocol. Several of those decisions will establish the institutional architecture of the Protocol, and these will have especially far-reaching consequences.

Most noteworthy among these is the proposal to establish a compliance procedure that is open to communications from the public, and whose committee members act as independent experts in their personal capacity. This mechanism, consistent with the principles of the Protocol, will, I am sure, significantly increase its effectiveness.

The other proposed activities in the programme of work will strengthen Parties' compliance with the Protocol and support implementation and ratification by non-Parties.

In particular, the proposed activities under the Task Force on Indicators and Reporting will help Parties to meet their first challenges: the establishment of targets in accordance with article 6 of the Protocol by August 2007, and after that, the obligation to report to the Meeting of the Parties on the progress achieved.

Other pillars of the Protocol are surveillance, early warning and response to outbreaks of water-related diseases. The proposed activities in the programme of work will assist countries in designing their response systems and will foster exchange of information and technical cooperation.

I also welcome the fact that the proposed programme of work addresses emerging issues, such as the threats posed by climate change, which in many countries have the potential to roll back hard-won human development gains. Adaptation and mitigation strategies must be developed to address this problem.

Capacity-building is very important if we want to realize the objectives of the Protocol, especially in those countries that face the biggest difficulties in implementing it. So I am happy to see that you attach great importance to capacity-building in the programme of work.

Clearly, much remains to be done in many countries with economies in transition to fully realize the potential of the Protocol. Concerted international action, as provided for in the Protocol, will be crucial to maximize the use of assistance funds and to concentrate donors' interventions where they are most needed. I therefore greatly appreciate the proposal by Norway to establish a facilitation mechanism which will promote the coordination of international aid in the field of the Protocol. At the same time, it will enhance the capacity of recipient countries to access sources of finance by helping them to formulate projects.

I also want to stress the crucial role of partnerships for the implementation of the Protocol. First of all, I thank our excellent partners in the joint secretariat, the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization.

Another key to the success of the Protocol is the possibility to rely on the experience gained under the mother Convention, the Water Convention, which has just celebrated the tenth anniversary of its entry into force. Close cooperation with the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention will make it possible to exploit synergies. At the same time, the Protocol, with its focus on national policies, represents a novelty and a new area of work compared to the Water Convention, which of course, has a main emphasis on transboundary issues.

The participation in this meeting of many international organizations, both from inside and outside the UN system, and of NGOs, including representatives of the civil society and the private sector, is an encouraging sign for the future development of cooperation to promote the Protocol's implementation. The secretariat is committed to collaboration with these and other partners.

In general, the programme of work reflects the political will of UNECE Governments to take an active and forward-looking approach, and I hope that we are all ready to move from words to deeds in the implementation of this Protocol.

Distinguished delegates, the success of the Protocol depends very much on a high level of commitment by its Parties, as well as by supportive organizations. In particular, I would like to thank all those countries that have led activities and have contributed in kind or in cash to the Trust Fund financing the meetings of the Signatories of the Protocol and the activities of the Working Group on Water and Health. The voluntary scheme of contributions that you are going to establish to support the implementation of the programme of work relies on the generosity of the Parties. I therefore urge you to pledge contributions to the Protocol's Trust Funds. It is also important to

involve a broad number of Parties as lead countries for programme implementation so that experience can be widely shared and burdens fairly distributed.

I would also like to stress that the decisions you are going to take will put an additional strain on the already stretched resources of the secretariat. It is therefore essential that Parties make available adequate financial means and human resources to support the secretariat. Without these, it will not be able to fully deliver the expected services. I therefore invite you to consider opportunities to strengthen the secretariat, in particular through extra-budgetary contributions.

Finally, allow me to thank the Government of Hungary for the leading role it assumed in the interim period, and in particular Mr. Mihaly Khadar for his excellent work as chair of the Working Group on Water and Health under the Water Convention. Mr. Thomas Kistemman, who served as Vice-Chair of the Working Group, has also played a key role during these years of preparation.

Also, I would like to thank the representatives of Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, who helped Mr. Kadar and the secretariat with the preparations for this meeting. Finally, I would like to thank Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and Norway, whose contributions to the UNECE trust fund made it possible to support the participation of representatives from countries in transition.

To conclude: we have much to celebrate today. But although much has been achieved, major challenges lie ahead. The full and effective implementation of the Protocol will require hard work over many years.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, your broad and high-level participation underscores the significance of this meeting and of the decisions that are before you. I hope that you will seize this opportunity opened by the entry into force of the Protocol on Water and Health. I hope that your deliberations will be fruitful, and that the Protocol will meet all the challenges ahead.