



United Nations

UNECE Weekly

Economic Commission for Europe

Issue N° 346 — 23-27 November 2009

MEETING OF PARTIES TO UNECE WATER CONVENTION USHERS IN NEW ERA FOR 1992 AGREEMENT

From 10 to 12 November 2009 in Geneva, the Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes tackled a number of challenges in transboundary cooperation and ushered in a new era for the Convention. The Meeting was held at the invitation of Switzerland.

Focus on implementation

The Meeting took an historic step forward by adopting the *Guide to Implementing the Convention* — a strategic document that will be an impetus for future work under the Convention. The *Guide* is a comprehensive commentary that provides explanations of the Convention's legal, technical and practical requirements as well as examples illustrating good practices in the UNECE region. The *Guide* will be an important reference for the 36 Parties to the Convention, as well as non-Parties, partners and stakeholders.

A second important breakthrough with much potential for improving transboundary water cooperation was the mandate given to the Convention's Legal Board to explore options for a mechanism to support implementation and compliance. Such a mechanism is needed to help Parties prevent or settle differences in interpretation and application, and to give them a clear and permanent forum to resort to for advice and support. It should also take into account countries' needs and the Convention's distinctive spirit of cooperation. Proposals will be considered by the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties in 2012.



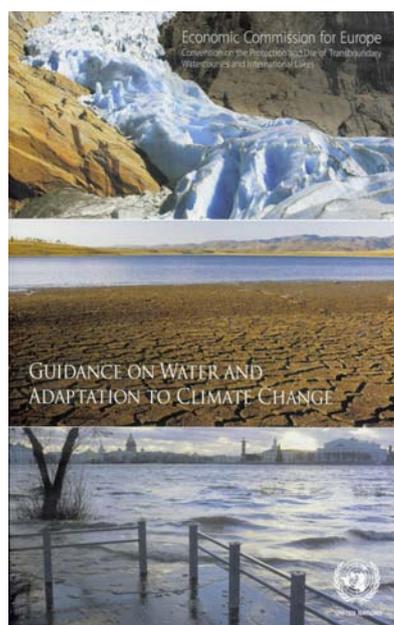
Fostering cooperation on climate change adaptation

Another advance was the *Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change* — a pioneering effort to address jointly climate change adaptation in transboundary basins.

The *Guidance* advises countries how to cope with the uncertainties of climate change together and how to effectively tackle its impacts in a concerted way. The *Guidance* sends a strong message that adaptation must start now.

Countries must work together to develop adaptation strategies and avoid unilateral measures that could inflict significant damage on other riparian countries. Cooperation on adaptation can benefit all riparian Parties, for example by sharing the costs and benefits of adaptation measures and by reducing uncertainty through the exchange of information.

The Meeting of the Parties decided to establish a platform for exchanging experience on adaptation to climate change in the transboundary context. The *Guidance* will be an important contribution to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen next month.



Strengthening integrated water resources management

The Convention and its secretariat will continue to be closely involved in the National Policy Dialogues in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia under the EU Water Initiative.

Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine currently participate in the Dialogues. Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan have all expressed interest, and the process will start in these countries in 2010.

The Dialogues are a useful means to help countries to develop integrated water resources management (IWRM) plans, analyse water reform needs, identify priorities and define action plans to attain the agreed targets.

Focus on Central Asia

The Meeting's high-level segment focused on Central Asia, as this subregion is one of the priority areas of work for the Convention.

The Central Asian countries, Parties to the Convention from elsewhere in the UNECE region and stakeholders shared experiences and lessons learned that could be useful for Central Asia.

The importance of transboundary water cooperation was recognized by all participants.

The panellists stressed the significant contribution of various projects and initiatives such as the EU Strategy for Central Asia, including the Berlin Water Process, and the Wider Europe Initiative of Finland, as well as the need for further coordination.

Currently only Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are Parties to the Water Convention, but the other Central Asian States have shown an increasing interest in this legal instrument.



Preventive action to protect water resources

The Meeting of the Parties addressed the high risks of environmental damage to transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwaters caused by failures of and accidents at tailings management facilities, which treat waste material from mines.

In Geneva, the Meeting endorsed the Safety guidelines and good practices for tailing management facilities, which should help Governments to provide leadership and create administrative frameworks for their safer operation and decommissioning.

Looking into the future

A road map to develop the Second Assessment of transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwaters in UNECE region, to be issued at the Seventh Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" (Astana, Kazakhstan, 2011), was agreed by the Meeting.

The Second Assessment will evaluate how the Convention is put into practice and what progress has been achieved to sustainably manage and protect our region's transboundary waters.

The Parties also agreed on the workplan for 2010-2012 and launched a programme of pilot projects to assist Parties with implementing the Convention and making use of the guidance documents it provides.

The projects will focus on climate change adaptation regarding transboundary waters, joint monitoring and assessment, and payments for ecosystem services to support integrated water resources management.

Although the programme will concentrate on Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe, it is expected that pilot projects will also be set up in EU countries and in basins shared by EU and non-EU countries.

Finally, the Meeting of the Parties showed a firm intention, before its next session in 2012, to see the 2003 amendments enter into force so that the Water Convention can be open to accession by any Member State of the United Nations.

Mongolia and Afghanistan, which are not UNECE member States, attended this Meeting of the Parties — a clear indication of their interest in transboundary water cooperation and in benefiting from the experience gained under the Convention.



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