

PROCEEDINGS OF THE STAKEHOLDER MEETING ON THE APPLICATION OF A STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESMENT (SEA) FOR THE DRAFT ALAZANI-IORI RIVER BASIN MANAGEMENT PLAN

21 October 2020
Tbilisi, Georgia
Online via Zoom Application

A Stakeholder Meeting of the pilot project on *the Application of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for the Draft Alazani-Iori River Basin Management Plan (the SEA pilot project)* convened on 21 October 2020 via Zoom application amid coronavirus pandemic. The aim of the workshop was to briefly introduce the main features of the *draft Alazani-Iori River Basin Management Plan (RBMP)* and present the key findings of *the SEA of the draft RBMP*, as well as solicit comments on the SEA Report for its finalization.

The meeting brought together representatives of *the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia*, other ministries, representatives of municipalities and civil society organizations (total number of participants reached 42, with 27 female and 15 male participants).

In the **opening session** welcoming remarks have been made by **Ms. Nino Tandilashvili**, Deputy Minister of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia (MEPA), **Mr. Alexandre Darras**, Attaché, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia and **Mr. Alisher Mamadzhonov**, Environmental Affairs Officer, UNECE.

Ms. Tandilashvili thanked the UNECE for its efforts to assist Georgia in strengthening the application of the SEA for RBMPs in response to the request of MEPA made in May 2019. She underlined the importance of this pilot project for strengthening the expertise in the field of SEA with particular focus on water resources management. It is of utmost importance to familiarize national experts with the practice existing in the EU countries, stressed the speaker. The pilot project also contributes to efforts of the Government of Georgia to reform the water sector. Ms. Tandilashvili thanked national and international institutions/organizations and national and international experts involved in this pilot project. **Mr. Darras**, welcomed participants of the meeting and thanked all for their active engagement in the implementation of the SEA pilot project that allowed to carry out all planned activities as envisaged, despite the obstacles posed by the COVID 19 pandemic. This project has value added for the reform of the water sector in Georgia, noted the speaker. There are also ongoing projects supported by the EU that will strengthen the implementation of the SEA in Georgia in other sectors as well. He underlined the importance of the SEA pilot project in the context of the implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Georgia and bringing the legislative and institutional framework closer to the requirements of *the EU Water Framework Directive*. *The EUWI Plus programme* supports Georgia in the implementation of all key aspects of the WFD, including the preparation of the RBMPs. Speaker stressed the readiness of the EU to further support Georgia in this area. **Mr. Mamadzhonov** welcomed participants of the stakeholder meeting. He brought to the attention of the audience the transboundary nature of *the Alazani-Iori river basin* shared by Azerbaijan and Georgia. He referred to the *Water-Food-Energy-Ecosystems Nexus Assessment for the Alazani/Ganikh River Basin* carried out by the UNECE few years ago that prepared good grounds for the development of the RBMP. The UNECE supports the efforts of the MEPA in transitioning towards the river basin management approach. He highlighted the importance of the preparation of Georgia for the accession to the *UNECE Water Convention* and the implementation of the AA. The pilot project supports Georgia in gaining more experience in the implementation of the SEA approach and further building the expertise in this field. Pilot projects that strengthen capacities are key for improving the understanding of key actors and experts about the requirements of the *UNECE Espoo and Water conventions*, as well as the WFD. Mr. Mamadzhonov thanked the MEPA, other ministries, national and international experts involved in the SEA pilot project, as well as the EUWI Plus programme

representatives in Georgia, who provided needed support throughout the implementation of the SEA pilot project. He also underlined the fruitful cooperation with the local partner – GEO, that ensured the implementation of all planned activities in an effective way.

The first session of the stakeholder meeting was chaired by **Ms. Nino Tkhilava**, *Head of Department of Environment and Climate Change of the MEPA*. She highlighted the importance of the SEA pilot project, as it addresses two relatively new for Georgia environmental approaches, for which the country needs to strengthen its capacity. These are the RBM & planning and the SEA for the water sector. To set the scene for discussions around the SEA, the EUWI Plus programme representatives briefly presented the draft Alazani-lori RBMP.

Mr. Zurab Jincharadze, *Representative of the EUWI Plus programme in Georgia*, spoke about the main features of the *draft Alazani-lori RBMP*. He familiarized participants with the key facts about the basin, including the state of the water quantity and quality in the basin, as well as the water use trends. Mr. Jincharadze then spoke about the main issues identified in the basin that include: i) water quality related challenges attributed to the point and diffuse sources of pollution; ii) water quantity related issues that are driven by high losses due to poor condition of irrigation and drinking water supply systems and the lack of water quantity monitoring data that does not allow adequate decision making; iii) risks attributed mainly to landslides, mudflow and erosion. He also touched upon the basic and supplementary measures proposed by the draft Alazani-lori RBMP. Mr. Jincharadze informed participants about the cost estimate of the implementation of the basic measures. The construction of wastewater treatment plants in the basin makes up to 32% of total costs, the rehabilitation of main channel and engineering work - 31% and the rehabilitation of sewage network - 34%. The speaker highlighted the approach that underpinned the development of the RBM plan – to seek balance between Georgian regulations and the WFD. The EUWI Plus further supports water Institutions in Georgia in equipping laboratories with accredited equipment, building capacity of experts and stakeholders and facilitating knowledge transfer and regional exchange of practices.

Ms. Maia Zumbuldze, *REC Caucasus*, spoke in details about the goals and objectives of the Alazani-lori RBMP and presented the structure and main elements of the draft Alazani-lori RBMP. She gave details of the pressure-impact analysis performed by the project team through which were identified the major water management issues in the Alazani-lori river basin. The assessment revealed that in the basin 30 water bodies are at risk, 142 water bodies are at possible risk and 12 water bodies are Heavily Modified Water Bodies (HMWB). Ms. Zumbuldze elaborated on the two main criteria used for the identification of the basic and supplementary measures of the RBMP: the long-term sustainable management of water resources and prevention of deterioration of the status of water bodies and their protection, enhancement and rehabilitation. The speaker presented the set of measures elaborated by the team that have been widely discussed through several rounds of consultations with stakeholders. The 1st cycle of the draft river basin management plan covers 6 years period. Once the new *Law on Management of Water Resources* is adopted, the draft RBM plan will be ready for the finalization and endorsement.

Mr. Martin Smutny, *International SEA Expert*, presented the methodology applied for the preparation of the SEA report and the process of the SEA application for the draft Alazani-lori RBMP. He spoke about similarities between RBM planning and SEA. Presenter underlined that RBMPs in Georgia do not have a legal status yet, therefore, the SEA process carried out by the pilot project was not a subject to a full procedure according to *the Environmental Assessment Code*. The key stages of the SEA process, however, have been closely followed, stressed the expert. Mr. Smutny highlighted the purpose of the SEA that is to enhance the likely positive effects that the RBMP can have on improving the existing problems in the basin (besides its primary focus on water) and outlined the main steps undertaken by the SEA pilot project team. He also highlighted that the project team was composed of 6 national experts including the national team leader, work of which has been guided by the international expert. Speaker also briefly touched upon the challenges team faced by the project team in the process of the SEA, that among

others included the lack of local data and information, lack of experience with SEA and COVID-19 restrictions that limited possibility for joint work, field visits and face-to-face consultations.

Mr. Irma Melikishvili, *team leader of national experts*, provided further details about the SEA report itself. She presented the key findings of the assessment. The speaker familiarized participants with the approach applied for the strategic environmental assessment that included: the baseline analysis and identification of key environmental and health issues related to the draft Alazani-iori RBMP; screening of RBMP measures to identify the measures with the most significant impacts on the key issues; detailed assessment of RBMP measures to analyze the likely effects and to formulate mitigation measures. The key conclusion of the assessment is that the RBMP/programme of measures (PoMs) has a potential to improve the status of certain environmental and health issues identified in the Alzani-iori River Basin and thus contribute to better environmental and health situation of the population in the basin. In particular, it will enable to improve water quality, ensure sufficient water for different uses, improve water monitoring system and reduce risks from natural hazards, improve soil structure and quality, facilitate better adaptation to climate change, will have positive impact on biodiversity, support sustainable socio-economic development of the region and impact on cultural heritage sites is not expected. Mr. Melikishvili then spoke in depths about the two sets of recommendations proposed by the SEA: measures to be considered in the RBMP and measures and conditions that should be followed up by a relevant agency when implementing RBMP. These include measures for water resources, measures for improving preparedness for natural hazards, environmental flow calculations, further improvement of conditions for biodiversity protection and strengthening positive impacts on protected areas, climate change adaptation, health impacts.

The **second part** of the session was dedicated to the discussion around the SEA report. Participants emphasized the pilot project's importance for building expertise in this area. In this respect, this process is very helpful for the MEPA as it enables the Ministry to conduct the SEA process for other RBMPs independently once the new Water Code is adopted.

A question was raised by the representative of Sabuko (NGO) regarding the ecosystems surrounding the Dali Reservoir, whether or not the state of these ecosystems has been addressed in the SEA report. **Ms. Melikishvili** informed participants that the SEA Report recommends to include measures targeting the Dali Reservoir and its surroundings in the 1st cycle of the basic measures of the RBMP. **Maia Zumbulidze**, REC, clarified that although additional study has been carried out on the floodplain forests, more information is needed to create a better understanding of direct or indirect impacts of the Dali reservoir on the surrounding floodplain forests. Considering the results of the study, the team working on the RBMP proposed two sets of measures – developing measures for releasing water from the Dali reservoir to imitate the natural flooding of floodplain forests and second set of measures that aim at the rehabilitation of the Dali reservoir infrastructure. The plan of measures has undergone the prioritization, due to obvious reasons, including the availability of financial resources.

Mr. Zurab Jincharadze, EUWI Plus, inquired where the mitigation measures proposed in the SEA are alternative plan of measures or they are additional measures to be added into RBMP by the MEPA. Ms. Melikishvili clarified that according to the procedures of the EIA Law, the proposed measures outlined in the SEA Report carry recommendatory character, however, it is advisable that these recommendations are taken into account. Mr. Jincharadze emphasized that the PoM will be implemented by different state agencies representing different sectors. MEPA, that will establish and oversee the work of the river basin management body, shall be responsible to control the implementation of the PoM (if law is adopted in the current form of the draft). He also underlined that all impacts that stem outside of the anthropogenic influence, are beyond the scope of the RBMPs. Therefore, issues related to the natural hazards shall not be addressed in the mitigation measures proposed by the SEA. There are some measures proposed by the SEA that can be incorporated into PoMs but it is up to MEPA and stakeholders which measures to

take up into the plan. He also noted that some measures included in the SEA report are duplicating measures proposed in the PoMs.

Ms. Gvantsa Sivsivadze, MEPA, inquired about further steps if the SEA recommendations are not taken into account. The second question raised by Ms Sivsivadze was regarding the fees for the use of natural resources. Mr. Melikishvili clarified that if recommendations are not taken into account, developer shall provide an explanation why certain recommendations were not taken into account. Mr. David Darsavelidze, *national expert of socio-economic issues*, underlined that in order to facilitate reduction of impact on environment adequate pricing should be introduced on extraction and use of natural resources – in this case - water. Currently, existing fees on water use does not encourage rational use of resources. It is also important that the fee for services – such as water supply for drinking and irrigation – are adequate that allow to cover maintenance costs. This is particularly important to prevent deterioration of infrastructure and prevent the collapse of the system that Georgia experienced in recent decades.

Ms. Nino Malashkhia, *the SEA pilot project Co-ordinator from GEO*, spoke about the next steps envisaged in the framework of the project – that includes the finalization of the report and submission to the MEPA by the end of November and organizing training on the SEA for the staff of MEPA. Ms. Malashkhia informed participants about the members of the team of national experts and thanked all state agencies that provided requested information in a timely manner.

Participants proposed to extend the deadline for comments on the SEA Report. Mr. Mamadzhinov, UNECE, expressed thanks to the team of experts and all participants. He agreed on the need to extend the timeframe for soliciting written comments. He expressed thanks to the EU Delegation, the EUWI Plus programme, translators and all who worked or supported the project.

Taking into account the above-mentioned remarks and decisions, Ms. Nino Tkhilava, the chair of the session, summarized the workshop and recalled the decisions as follows:

DECISIONS OF THE CONSULTATION WORKSHOP

1. Importance of engagement of key stakeholders, including the municipalities and local partners in the Alazani-lori river basin;
2. Extending the period of written feedback to 2 Nov 2020;
3. Delivery of the SEA report by the end of Nov 2020.
4. Organizing training for the staff of MEPA and Ministry of Health by mid Nov 2020.