

High-level session during the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties
The Protocol on Water and Health:
Strengthening the resilience of WASH and health services in times of climate change and pandemics

Wednesday, 16 November 2022, Geneva, Switzerland

CONCEPT NOTE

BACKGROUND

Global drivers, such as climate change, population growth, urbanization, environmental pollution, alter the availability and quality of freshwater resources and challenge access to safe and reliable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services, exacerbating already existing challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular has shown both how vulnerable WASH and health services can be, but also how important they are in helping countries to recover from the impacts.

The consequences of climate change, such as water quality changes, water scarcity, floods and sea level rise, together with their social, economic and environmental impacts, are a rapidly emerging concern across the pan-European region that requires the urgent attention of policymakers, scientists and practitioners. The impact of these changes on WASH services and behaviours and on water resources is multifaceted and can have significant public health and environmental consequences exacerbating the occurrence of water-related diseases and environmental degradation. In April 2022, the pan-European regional preparatory meeting for the UN 2023 Water Conference also highlighted the urgent need for the region to further strengthen our adaptation to climate change to accelerate progress in making drinking water and sanitation available, safe and affordable for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of WASH services as the first line of defence in preventing and controlling the spread of infectious disease. The World Health Assembly resolution 73.1 on COVID-19 response identified WASH as a central component, calling upon countries “*to take measures to support access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and infection prevention and control, ensuring that adequate attention is paid to the promotion of personal hygienic measures in all settings, including humanitarian settings, and particularly in health facilities*”.

These emerging challenges require appropriate intersectoral and multi-stakeholder action among numerous relevant sectors, including health, environment and water along with the joint development of strategies and recommendations to respond to them.

Through its multi-sectoral convening power, its target setting and accountability framework, and its various tools on offer, the Protocol on Water and Health can play an important role in building forward better and fairer from the pandemic while addressing the effects of climate change.

In the last twenty years, the Protocol has supported remarkable progress in water, sanitation, hygiene and health across the region, particularly in providing access to safe and equitable drinking water and sanitation services, improving drinking water quality, reducing the occurrence of water-related disease incidents and outbreaks, and sound water resource management. The Protocol continues to contribute to advancing and operationalizing the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in countries of the region, especially in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Ensure availability and

sustainable management of water and sanitation for all) and Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages).

It can support the recovery process towards a more resilient world after COVID-19 by placing access to essential services, such as universal and equitable access to safe and climate-resilient drinking water, sanitation and hygiene for all in all settings, at the centre. The Protocol also seeks to support policymakers in integrating adaptation to climate change impacts into water and sanitation policy and strategic planning, while helping water and sanitation service operators to effectively manage climate risks.

SESSION OBJECTIVE

The high-level session will provide an opportunity to appraise progress and take stock of the concrete results of countries' responses to ensure access to water, sanitation, hygiene and health for all in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and possible future pandemics. It will also foster an open dialogue on how to tackle the persisting gaps and challenges posed by climate change in the pan-European region to create climate-resilient WASH and health services. The main outcomes of the session will be reflected in a summary of proposed actions and recommendations, which will be brought forward towards the 2023 United Nations Water Conference (New York, 22-24 March 2023) and inform the formulation of the declaration of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, July 2023).

The strategic session will present examples of country-led initiatives that illustrate the key role of the Protocol on Water and Health in ensuring WASH across countries and sectors in the context of pandemic and in increasing the resilience of WASH and health services to climate change. It will also discuss how to move forward to accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goals 3, 6 and 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts), including mobilizing commitments towards the UN 2023 Water Conference.

The session will focus on the following questions:

- What are the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and how can we further prioritize national and local WASH actions and policies to effectively respond to and recover from the pandemic and prevent future outbreaks, including to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 6?
 - *How can immediate policy responses be taken to secure and extend WASH service provision in times of pandemics?*
 - *What WASH interventions should be prioritized in the context of the pandemic to better protect the health and well-being of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations?*
 - *How can national targets be set and action plans be developed under the Protocol to help countries respond to and recover from the pandemic?*
- How can the impacts of climate change on water, sanitation and health services in the pan-European region be effectively addressed with a view of achieving Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 13?
 - *What policy and practical responses has your country taken to strengthen the resilience of water resources, water and sanitation facilities and services to the effects of climate change?*
 - *How can the Protocol framework and its tools further support countries to strengthen climate resilience in water management and in the WASH and health sectors?*

SESSION FORMAT

The session will begin with welcome addresses by high-level officials from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

A first keynote speech will set the scene by providing a landscape analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the water, sanitation and health situation in the pan-European region and outlining how the Protocol framework can support countries to respond to and recover from it.

A second keynote speech will provide insights into the effects of climate change in the pan-European region and their impacts on water, sanitation and health services and sectors, and explore what opportunities exist at both technical and political levels to address them, including through the Protocol.

Following each keynote speech, a panel composed of high-level representatives from countries and international and non-governmental organizations will discuss a range of priority issues related to the challenges posed by the pandemic and by climate change to the WASH and health services and facilities. Panelists will discuss existing options, good practices and solutions to tackle these threats and impacts in the pan-European region and also be invited to reflect on the role of the Protocol in shaping the regional agenda on water, sanitation and health and in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Subsequently, Parties, other States and stakeholders will be invited to participate in an interactive, moderated discussion on the above issues, through interventions from the floor.

Priority will be given to high-level speakers (such as ministers, deputy ministers, state secretaries, permanent secretaries, heads of agencies). Interventions and statements should not exceed three minutes. To facilitate the running of the high-level session, delegations planning to make a statement are invited to inform the secretariat in advance.