Project on strengthening tailings safety and the prevention of accidental water pollution in Uzbekistan and beyond in Central Asia
As a result of mining activities in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries, large amounts of hazardous waste are generated, which are generally stored in tailings management facilities (TMFs). TMFs can pose high risks to societies and the environment, especially if poorly constructed or maintained. Their safe management is critical for preventing TMF failures and their disastrous consequences.

Uzbekistan faces particular challenges with uranium tailings, many of which are located in the vicinity of residential areas and susceptible to risks posed by natural disasters. Given their proximity to earthquake lines, landslide areas and water streams, a tailings accident could cause accidental water pollution, including with transboundary effects, and result in severe soil and water contamination.

Moreover, responsibilities for ensuring industrial safety and the prevention of accidental water pollution from TMFs are often spread across different competent authorities, thus requiring well-functioning inter-institutional coordination and cooperation. This is a challenge for many Central Asian countries.

To this end, the project aims to strengthen tailings safety and the prevention of accidental water pollution in Uzbekistan and beyond in Central Asia, incl. their engagement in related global processes. It will enhance Uzbekistan’s expert and institutional capacity on the safe management of TMFs and improve related transboundary cooperation both at the subregional and river-basin levels.

The main beneficiary of the project is Uzbekistan, namely its competent authorities and operators. Other Central Asian countries will also benefit from the project through its subregional activities.

Partnerships with other relevant international and regional organizations (e.g. UNDP, UNDRR, UNEP, IWAC, WIC, OECD, OSCE) are also pursued in the project’s implementation.

The project supports the application of available guidance, such as the UNECE Safety guidelines and good practices for tailings management facilities, a related checklist methodology (incl. Tailings Risk Index) and the Online Toolkit and Training for Strengthening Mine Tailings Safety (incl. an animated video).

The project also builds on the results of previously implemented UNECE projects on strengthening the safety of mining operations, in particular of TMFs, in Kazakhstan (2017-19) and Tajikistan (2019-21). It also seeks synergies with the on-going UNECE Project on supporting countries of Central Asia in strengthening the safety of mine tailings (since 2020).
The expected project results are:

- Improved knowledge and use of existing good practices and tools to safely manage mine tailings, developed by UNECE or partners, such as the Safety Guidelines and Good Practices for Tailings Management Facilities, the decision 2020/1 on strengthening mine tailings safety in the UNECE region and beyond, the Checklist methodology and the Global Industry Standard for Tailings Management.

- Improved institutional coordination and established/enhanced cooperation mechanisms between authorities at the national and local levels, and between authorities and industry in Uzbekistan.

- Improved subregional / transboundary cooperation on mine tailings safety and the prevention of accidental water pollution, including at the river basin level in Central Asia.

- Strengthened implementation of the UNECE Industrial Accidents and Water Conventions, incl. enhanced capacity to accede to the Industrial Accidents Convention, in order to enhance water management and to reduce related risks, and other relevant policy recommendations, in particular the UNECE EPRs for Central Asia.

- Enhanced engagement of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries in global processes related to mine tailings safety, notably at UNEP in the framework of UNEA-5.2 (Nairobi, 28 February - 2 March 2022) and UNEA-6 (Nairobi, 26 February - 1 March 2024)
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