

**Economic Commission for Europe, 63rd session  
31 March 2009  
Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation**

**Adaptation in the water sector**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Currently, numerous global activities are in place or are initiated towards reducing the greenhouse gas emissions in order to mitigate the impacts of climate change. This morning we have been informed on the various actions that are underway. However, despite the inevitability and necessity of mitigation efforts, we also have to face the fact that those efforts will only be effective in the longer run. Meanwhile our climate will be changing and the ensuing challenges are numerous. We have to prepare to face these challenges. But, unfortunately, many countries, also in the UNECE region, still are considering the uncertainty connected to climate change as a reason for not preparing for the future.

Most of the challenges are sharing the element of water. Climate change will have predominant effects on temperature and precipitation and with that on the hydrology of rivers and lakes. This consequently changes the way water management is organised. Water is therefore key to most adaptation strategies and should therefore be central in the adaptation agenda. Climate change leads to situations where either too much or too little water is available while its quality gets impaired. This in turn affects a range of economic sectors including agriculture, energy and hydropower, navigation, health, tourism, as well as communities and the environment. The advances we have seen in the UNECE region over the last decades in terms of economic, social and environmental development are running the risk of being nullified by climate change impacts.

While in some countries these impacts may be heavier than in other countries, and the resulting adaptation needs may vary between regions, no country can ignore the changes. Fortunately, more and more countries gradually are recognising this and have developed or are in the process of developing adaptation strategies. From the already existing adaptation strategies we can learn that adaptation is not a one-time action but requires a step-by-step approach. In doing so, we have to keep an eye on the long-term developments in climate change impacts.

So what can we do to ameliorate the situation? As stated, water is a central issue in working towards adaptation and will affect, but is also affected by, various sectors. For example, agriculture is heavily dependent upon water availability and often reduces the availability of water resources in both quality and quantity. Hydropower production also depends on water availability and can have serious effects on aquatic ecosystems. On the other hand, hydropower dams can also be used for storage of water to be used in periods when less water is available. All these interactions require an integrated, multifunctional approach where energy production, nature development, urban planning, agricultural advances, and other developments are connected and are working towards a climate resilient society. For example, it is worthwhile to look for the synergies between water adaptation and mitigation strategies that forests and wetlands can provide. To achieve such synergies, closer cooperation and possibly integration between the Climate and Water communities is needed. And we will need to ensure that the post-Kyoto-agreement gives enough attention to adaptation and in particular to the role of the water sector and its international context, and that it acknowledges water as the essential key factor to our health, our economy and our ecosystems.

Just like climate, water is not restricted by administrative boundaries. Water resources are being shared by countries; and thus, climate change will set off shared risks and challenges to these water resources. Failure of one country to act upon the changes, for instance by neglecting incidents upstream with strongly increased run-off, can as a consequence have additional negative effects on other countries. Also, there is a tendency among upstream countries, especially in situations where the water availability will be reduced, to retain the water necessary for their own demands, leaving even less water for downstream countries. Improved water management, for instance through restoration of wetlands, can improve local possibilities for economic activities and create bigger markets. But increased tensions between countries triggered by inequitable use of water resources will generate high costs that seldom outweigh the benefits of cooperation. Cooperation between riparian countries is for that reason crucial to enable successful adaptation strategies and also to maximise the mutual benefits of adaptation measures.

The uncertainty connected to knowledge about the impacts of climate change is often used as a subterfuge for inaction. This excuse, however, is not valid. It is true, additional efforts are needed to develop more insights and reduce the knowledge gaps. But we need a two-track approach: adaptation measures, often no-regret measures, are already to be developed today, on the basis of the available knowledge and insights. Meanwhile, research and knowledge development should be continued to gain better insights into the future development of climate, even aiming at looking into the next century. On this basis, new measures should be defined and implemented step-by-step. This will enable us to gradually improve adaptation measures in the longer run. And it will be of great help for our countries to share our experiences and lessons learned from adaptation efforts.

The UNECE Water Convention provides a solid legal basis as well as a framework for riparian countries to share their water resources in an equitable and reasonable manner based on equality and reciprocity between the countries. Moreover, the work under the Water Convention has yielded a range of guiding documents on various topics as well as a broad knowledge base of experiences and lessons learned to assist countries in implementing the provisions of the Water Convention.

In the light of today's theme I would particularly like to mention a specific guidance document that is currently being developed under the joint leadership of Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. This Guidance aims to assist Parties and non-Parties in developing climate change adaptation strategies for the water sector, in particular in the transboundary context. It will be presented to the Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention in November 2009 for adoption. A programme of implementation projects is expected to be established to share experiences with, and lessons learned through, developing adaptation strategies. This programme invites UNECE countries to join and commit themselves to develop and implement such projects. There are consequently no reasons to wait any longer.

To conclude my intervention, I would like to state that, even if much action is taken, we still have to do more. The first step is to better implement current water management policies and agreements, including the Water Convention and its Protocol on Water and Health, and concentrate more on operation and maintenance. This has to be based on the notion that we cannot continue in the way we were used to. An important step is to depart from the path of trying to supply the water demands, and to work instead towards reducing the water demand. The second step is to adapt now. A vast body of knowledge is already

available and the tools and other enabling mechanisms are in place to start acting towards adaptation today. The third step is to develop better insights into the near and further future, based on research and exchange of experiences and lessons learned. This should also focus on improving the enabling mechanisms, especially governance and financing tools. Establishment of pilot projects aiming at developing adaptation strategies will support this work. Step-by-step, all this will help us to sustainably adapt ourselves to the climate change challenges. I would strongly urge for this message to be raised at COP15 and to be translated into a substantial element of the post-Kyoto-treaty!

Thank you for your attention.

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