

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

112th meeting

Geneva (hybrid), 14 December 2020

Item 6 of the provisional agenda

Informal document No. **2020/52**

Decision on the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health

I. Background

1. Water, sanitation and health are at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, providing access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and hygiene is essential to protect human health and well-being, and therefore to realize the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda. The provision of water, sanitation and hygiene has also proved key to protecting human health during the COVID-19 outbreak. Being one of the most effective protection measures, frequent handwashing according to appropriate hygiene standards requires a continuous supply of safe water and operational sanitation systems available for all in all settings. The pandemic also highlighted that people without access to water, sanitation and hygiene services are amongst the most vulnerable in the context of the infectious disease outbreaks, hampering the efforts to contain the spread of the disease.

2. Nevertheless, in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region over 16 million people still lack access to basic drinking water and more than 31 million people are in need of basic sanitation (WHO, 2017). As pointed out by the United Nations Secretary-General in his report on responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19,¹ the pandemic is likely to have profound negative effects on the attainment of the 2030 Agenda, in particular the promise of “leaving no one behind”, as increasing evidence shows that vulnerable and marginalized groups were hit the hardest by the outbreak of COVID-19.

3. To accelerate action and deliver concrete results on the 2030 Agenda, it is key to take full advantage of existing mechanisms and platforms. The Protocol on Water and Health is a unique legally binding agreement available to countries in the UNECE region, linking sustainable water management with the prevention, control and reduction of water-related diseases. The Protocol is jointly serviced by UNECE and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe.

4. The Protocol plays a key role in supporting the achievement of the related Sustainable Development Goals. Work under the Protocol has therefore been aligned to support the 2030 Agenda and expanded in scope to this end (e.g. work on water and health governance and climate-resilient sanitation). At its fifth session (Belgrade, 19-21 November 2019), the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol recognized that, due to the extension of mandate and membership of the Protocol, as well as a growing number of requests for support, the implementation of the current and future programmes of work under the Protocol would require adequate United Nations regular budget resources. Parties, therefore, requested the United Nations Secretary-General to “increase the regular budget support by UNECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 and to support the accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries.”

5. The UNECE Executive Committee (EXCOM) is invited to submit the attached draft decision to the Commission for consideration at its sixty-ninth session in 2021.

¹ See https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_report_socio-economic_impact_of_covid19.pdf.

II. Recent developments related to the Protocol on Water and Health provide new opportunities

6. The Protocol on Water and Health was adopted in 1999 and entered into force in 2005. Since its adoption, the Protocol had grown and matured into a major regional home for policy and technical developments and a data hub on water and health.

7. Over the past years, activities under the Protocol have stimulated remarkable improvements in water, sanitation, hygiene and health in the UNECE region, particularly with regard to assessing situation with equity of access, providing access to basic drinking water and sanitation services, in particular in rural areas, improving drinking water quality and reducing the occurrence of water-related disease incidents and outbreaks. Among others, due to the work carried out under the Protocol, more than 63 million people gained access to drinking water and 84 million people to sanitation services between 2000 and 2017.

8. However, the water, sanitation and health agenda in the UNECE region remains unfinished. Challenges requiring urgent attention and action include providing equitable access to water, sanitation and hygiene for all in all settings, gaps in ensuring safely managed and climate-resilient water and sanitation services, and addressing emerging health concerns related to the management of water and sanitation systems, such as legionella prevention and antimicrobial resistance.

9. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact around the world, affecting human health and well-being and threatening development prospects. The crisis has made clear that access to safe, reliable and resilient water, sanitation and hygiene services is a key public health priority for preventing contamination with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Indeed, in the absence of vaccine or effective treatment, frequent handwashing with soap is a simple but effective intervention to limit the spread of the disease.

10. The provision of safe, reliable and resilient water, sanitation and hygiene services for all and in all settings is therefore a key precondition for societies that are resilient to the spread of disease, and it is a crucial pillar for water-related disease prevention in the long-term.

11. In terms of COVID-19 recovery and preparedness, the Protocol provides concrete tools to support countries in setting, implementing and monitoring national objectives in the areas of water, sanitation, hygiene and health, strengthening national capacity for surveillance of drinking-water quality and management of water-related disease outbreaks, and promoting the provision of safe water, sanitation and hygiene services for all in all settings, including in schools, health care facilities and communities.

12. Indeed, as a legally binding agreement, the Protocol offers a sound, forward-looking and participatory framework and unique multilateral platform, bringing together the water, environment and health sectors to address new challenges and persisting problems in water, sanitation and health in the UNECE region.

13. To date, 27 states are Parties to the Protocol, covering about 60% of the population of the UNECE region, and more than 42 States overall are actively engaged in its activities. However, the

tools and methodologies developed under the Protocol are available for use by all countries, irrespective of whether they are Parties to the Protocol or not.

- For example, the *Equitable Access Score-card: Supporting policy processes to achieve the human right to water and sanitation*² developed under the Protocol provides a methodology for self-assessment of current challenges that prevent governments from ensuring universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene and for developing action plans to address inequities. This is a concrete tool that has been used to progressively realize the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and therefore improve the governance and policy frameworks needed to develop an inclusive and effective response to possible future epidemics.
- In practice, the Protocol on Water and Health offers:
 - A regional coordination platform to exchange experience, build partnerships and share water, sanitation and hygiene data across sectors;
 - A system for improving governance and accountability on water and health through target setting and reporting mechanism;
 - Practical tools and methodologies and access to expert community for building capacity on water, sanitation, hygiene and health at community, national and regional level.

14. The recent fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, which brought together more than 200 participants representing 40 countries and partner organizations, acknowledged the role of the Protocol as a key mechanism for implementing the 2030 Agenda, in particular Goals 3 and 6, through the setting and implementation of tailored national targets and reporting. Accordingly, Parties included into the programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 a new mandate by expanding the scope of programme area 1 on improving governance for water and health, and of programme area 5 on safe and efficient management of water supply and sanitation systems by introducing a new sub-area of work on climate-resilient sanitation.³

15. In his opening video message to the fifth session, the Secretary-General of the United Nations highlighted that the Protocol helps countries to realize the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda and urged all countries to accede to the Protocol and to strive for its full implementation.

III. The secretariat of the Protocol on Water and Health: current situation and additional resource needs

16. The Protocol is a unique example of successful inter-agency cooperation within the UN System as it is serviced jointly by UNECE and the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

² United Nations publication, ECE/MP.WH/8.

³ See [report of the MoP](#), exp. para 97a.

17. At UNECE, the secretariat of the Protocol on Water and Health is provided by the Water Unit within the Environment Division.

- Since the 1990s, the Water Unit comprises two Regular Budget (RB) professional staff: one at P-4 level (who manages the water unit and acts as part-time Water Convention Secretary and part-time co-Secretary of the Protocol on Water and Health) and the other at P-3 level, who supports exclusively work under the Water Convention.
- The RB professional staff at P-4 level contributes 0.3 of staff time to provide the function of the co-Secretary to the Protocol, with the rest of the time dedicated to the Water Convention.
- The global opening of the Water Convention and the corresponding increase of the UNECE Water Unit's workload is an additional challenge in terms of resources.
- In addition to a maximum of 0.3 of RB staff at P-4 level, UNECE secretariat has only one extrabudgetary post at P-3 level fully dedicated to servicing the institutional structure of the Protocol and its technical activities.

18. Given the range and complexity of the activities requiring adequate leadership and guidance as well as the extension of mandate and its alignment with the 2030 Agenda and growing membership of the Protocol, the RB resources available to manage the delivery of expected outputs under the Protocol are not adequate.

19. In addition, the UNECE secretariat may not be in a position to provide appropriate level of involvement and the same quality of services vis-à-vis its partner organization – WHO Regional Office for Europe, should there not be a fully dedicated RB staff at P-4 level to act as Co-Secretary to the Protocol.

20. The Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, at its fifth session, considered the above challenges faced by the UNECE secretariat deriving from the lack of appropriate staff resources to handle the implementation of the Protocol's programmes of work. It discussed the need for adequate United Nations regular budget resources, in particular to ensure that the UNECE part of the secretariat was headed by a fully dedicated P-4 staff, and was informed of the relevant budgetary implications (\$200,000–\$275,000 USD per year, including general operating expenses). Based on such discussion, the Meeting of the Parties in its decision “requested the Secretary-General to increase the support by UNECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 and to support accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries” ([ECE/MP.WH/19–EUPCR/1814149/1.2/2019/MOP-5/06](https://www.unep.org/documents/default.asp?docid/1814149/1.2/2019/MOP-5/06), para 96 and 97 d).

21. An Oral Statement detailing the financial requirements, provided by the Director of the Programme Planning and Budget Division of the Department of Management, Strategy, Policy and Compliance, will be formally presented at the time of consideration by the Commission. A draft oral statement is annexed to fully inform member States ahead of EXCOM.

22. Without adequate regular budget resources, the UNECE secretariat will not be able to deliver on the extended mandate of the Protocol, in support of the 2030 Agenda and inclusive COVID-19 recovery, support its increasing membership and deliver adequate co-secretariat services within the joint secretariat.

IV. Proposed draft decision for consideration by the sixty-ninth Commission

(xx 69) Implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health

The Commission,

Acknowledging that the Protocol on Water and Health provides a unique framework to address water, sanitation and health issues in the pan-European region and achieve objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in areas related to water, sanitation, hygiene and health which is especially important in view of the Covid-19 pandemic;

Welcoming the remarkable improvements in water, sanitation and health in the region, stimulated by the Protocol on Water and Health since its adoption 20 years ago;

Noting that the number of the Parties to the Protocol is progressively growing;

Also noting the adoption, at the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties, of the [programme of work for 2020-2022](#) to support the Protocol's implementation, including in particular the additional mandates on work related to support to the 2030 Agenda and to increase climate resilience in the context of sanitation;

Recognizing the importance of adequate financing for the implementation of the Protocol in order to advance and operationalize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as other global and regional water-, sanitation-, hygiene- and health-related commitments, including the Declaration of the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Ostrava Declaration);

1. Requests the Secretary-General to increase the support by ECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 as well as its future programmes of work, and to support accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries;
2. Decides to transmit to the Economic and Social Council at its session of 2021 a draft resolution on this issue for consideration and possible adoption.

Draft ECOSOC resolution on the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health

Implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health

The Economic and Social Council,

Noting the adoption by the 69th session of the Economic Commission for Europe (Geneva, 20-21 April 2021) of decision xx (69) on the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health by which the Economic Commission for Europe recommended to the Economic and Social Council endorsing the said decision,

Endorses decision xx (69) of the Economic Commission for Europe on the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health.

Next steps:

The UNECE Executive Committee (EXCOM) is invited to submit the above draft decision for consideration by the Commission at its sixty-ninth session (Geneva, 20-21 April 2021).

Draft EXCOM decision:

The Executive Committee thanks Belarus, which holds the chairmanship of the Protocol on Water and Health, for the briefing on the fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties (Belgrade, 19-21 November 2019) and the work of the Protocol.

The Executive Committee takes note of the request of the Meeting of the Parties to “the Secretary-General to increase the support by ECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 and to support accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries”.

The Executive Committee decides to submit the related draft decision contained in informal document 2020/52 to the sixty-ninth session of the Commission for consideration.

Programme budget implications of the draft decision on Implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health

A. Request contained in the draft resolution

1. In the draft resolution, [ECE to include the reference number for the document, and the name of the resolution] the Commission requests the Secretary-General to:

increase the support by ECE, in order to ensure the effective management and full implementation of the expanded programme of work of the Protocol for 2020–2022 as well as its future programmes of work, and to support accession to and implementation of the Protocol by the acceding countries.

B. Relationship of the request to the proposed programme budget

2. The request contained in the draft resolution [ECE to include the reference number for the document, and the name of the resolution] falls under the overall programme of work of ECE. In particular the request is relevant to subprogramme 1 Environment, to its Water Unit which provides the secretariat for the Protocol on Water and Health.

C. Activities by which the request would be implemented

3. Background of the request:

The background to the request is set out in the preambular paragraphs of the draft resolution. Relevant resolutions include the decision of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health contained in the report on its fifth session and its addendum (ECE/MP.WH/19, Add.1).

4. The activities by which the request would be implemented are the following:
 - a. Service the growing membership of the Protocol by providing policy and technical guidance to new Parties and advise to the other UNECE Member States in process of accession;
 - b. In accordance with the new extended mandate, strengthen the Protocol as a key mechanism for implementing the 2030 Agenda, in particular Goals 3 and 6, through supporting Parties and other UNECE Member States in setting, implementing and monitoring tailored national targets and improving the reporting capacity;
 - c. Support building evidence and knowledge exchange on climate-resilient sanitation between Parties and other UNECE Member States, as per the extended mandate of the Protocol;

- d. Support development of concrete tools and guidance to UNECE Member States for strengthening capacity for management of water-related disease outbreaks, such as COVID-19, and promoting the provision of safe water, sanitation and hygiene services for all in all settings;
- e. Promote political awareness on the importance of the equity of access for realization of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and build capacity on carrying out national and city-level self-assessments of the situation with equity of access in order to stimulate action by UNECE Member States to address the issue.

D. Financial implications of the request

5. The implementation of the request in the draft resolution would have additional cost implications for the proposed programme budget of the United Nations for 2022. These requirements, which are recurrent, total \$214,500 and comprise:

Recurrent requirements:

- a. General temporary assistance resources for 12 months at the P-4 level (Environment Affairs Officer), in the amount of \$205,000, to be funded under Sect. 20: Economic Commission for Europe of the programme budget.
- b. Additional resources, in the amount of \$9,500 for annual rental of office accommodation (\$9,100) and annual telecommunications services (\$400) to be funded under section 29E: United Nations Office at Geneva of the programme budget.

E. Summary

6. Should the Commission approve the draft resolution, the Economic and Social Council would be requested to endorse the contents of the resolution, after which additional programme budget appropriations for the year 2022, amounting to \$214,500 (recurrent) would be requested in the context of the report of the Secretary-General on revised estimates resulting from resolutions and decisions of ECOSOC adopted during its 2021 session.
7. An additional amount of \$24,300 would be requested under section 36, Staff assessment, would be requested in the context of the report of the Secretary-General on revised estimates resulting from resolutions and decisions of ECOSOC adopted during its 2021 session to be offset by an equivalent amount under income section 1, Income from staff assessment.
