WORKSHOP ON EQUITABLE ACCESS TO WATER AND SANITATION:
Challenges, good practices and lessons learned

4 and 5 July 2011
Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland
starting at 10 a.m. on Monday, 4 July 2011

INFORMATION NOTICE

I. Background and rationale

The recognition in July 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly and, two months later, by the United Nations Human Rights Council that water and sanitation are a human right has significant implications. It entitles everyone to water and sanitation which is available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and safe. It obliges Governments to take concrete steps towards ensuring access to safe water and sanitation for all.

In the pan-European region there are still 140 million people without access to safe drinking water and even more without access to sanitation. These figures hide important inequities. First of all, countries with economies in transition have lower levels of access to water and sanitation compared with Western European ones. But there are also severe inequities within countries:

- **Geographical disparities**: in many countries people living in rural or remote areas have significantly lower levels of access to safe water and improved sanitation;

- **Affordability constraints**: in some countries, people with low incomes often find access to water and sanitation unaffordable; this situation will be exacerbated as countries move towards full cost recovery of water and sanitation services;

- **Inequities suffered by vulnerable and marginalized groups**, as well as groups with specific needs (such as Roma and Travellers, ethnic minorities, disabled persons, etc.) who face additional barriers to access than those of ordinary citizens.

If water and sanitation for all is to be achieved, special attention needs to be paid to redress those inequities early on. Adoption of an equitable access approach is needed as business as usual is leaving many behind. Equitable access requires rethinking water and sanitation strategies and making use of available options to reach everyone.

Policymakers responsible for the water and sanitation sector are under pressure. The expectations are high, the engagements demanding, the financial resources limited. The solutions require increases in investments and in many cases radical reforms in policies and governance frameworks. Equitable access requires facing political trade-offs head on. Are
certain groups being left behind because they are too difficult and expensive to serve? If so, will it be more difficult and expensive to give them access “at the end” than if they are integrated “now” in access strategies? Do our societies back a “low-hanging fruit” approach at the cost of justice and fairness? How does this square with the human right to water and sanitation?

Many Governments in the pan-European region are mindful of the importance of promoting equitable access. One of the main objectives of the UNECE\(^1\)-WHO/Europe\(^2\) Protocol on Water and Health to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes is the provision of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation to everyone. Moreover, the Protocol includes several provisions on non-discrimination and equity aspects. For instance, article 5 requires that “equitable access to water, adequate in terms both of quantity and of quality, should be provided for all members of the population, especially those who suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion”.

Work to support faster progress is under way. A document on “Good practices to promote equitable access to water and sanitation” is currently being prepared by a drafting group of experts under the leadership of France. The document, which should be ready for dissemination at the Sixth World Water Forum (Marseille, France, March 2012), will be discussed and enriched at the workshop.

One year after the United Nations General Assembly resolution on the right to water and sanitation, and with only four years left until the 2015 Millennium Development Goals deadline, it seems timely to discuss options to promote equitable access and to identify good practices that can inspire faster progress.

II. Objectives

The workshop will bring together countries and other stakeholders engaged in the provision of water and sanitation services, with the aim to:

- Analyse the specific challenges and debate the political, economic and practical implications of equitable access to water and sanitation;
- Exchange practical experience and share lessons learned on the policies and measures to be enacted to provide access to water and sanitation to vulnerable and marginalized groups, to reduce geographical disparities in access and to address affordability issues;
- Identify good practices, success factors and lessons learned;
- Support Governments in complying with the requirements of article 5 of the Protocol on Water and Health as regards promoting equitable access to water and sanitation, as well as their obligations under international human rights law.

The workshop is the second one organized on this theme in the framework of the Protocol on Water and Health. It will build on the results of the 2007 workshop and illustrate recent developments in this area. Information on the first workshop, “Equitable access to water” (Paris, 5–6 July 2007) can be found at www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access/Equitable_access_main.htm.

\(^1\) United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.
\(^2\) Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization:
III. Organization of work and call for contributions

The workshop will be organized on 4 and 5 July, under the leadership of the Government of France, with the support of the UNECE secretariat of the Protocol on Water and Health, and in cooperation with the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

The workshop is addressed to all those who are responsible for or involved in the process of developing policies, programmes and measures for ensuring access to water and sanitation in the pan-European region: first and foremost governmental representatives, but also water and health managers, local authorities and representatives of academia, research institutes, non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

As a main objective of the workshop is the exchange of experience, contributions are invited on the following topics:

- Experiences with policy measures to promote access by vulnerable and marginalized groups, as well as groups with specific needs, to water and sanitation
- Experiences with policy measures to address geographical disparities in access to water supply and sanitation
- Experiences with policy measures to address affordability concerns

Contributions can refer to ongoing and recent experiences, as well as to historical experiences.

Abstracts (two pages) for presentations on the above topics should be sent to the UNECE secretariat (nataliya.nikiforova@unece.org) by 16 May 2011. The abstracts should be structured as follows:

- Background: context and presentation of access challenge
- Policy measures adopted, including the rationale and process for their adoption
- Results achieved and remaining challenges
- Success factors and lessons learned.

A detailed programme will be issued in June 2011.

IV. Background documentation

The background document for the workshop will be the draft version of the document on “Good practices to promote equitable access to water and sanitation”.3

Participants are welcome to make available any other relevant material at the workshop.

V. Practical information

The workshop will start at 10 a.m. on Monday, 4 July and end at 5.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 5 July 2011. It will be held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. The working languages will be English, French and Russian.

Focal points are requested to disseminate information on the workshop and to facilitate nomination of relevant experts from their respective countries.

Eligible participants from countries with economies in transition may apply for financial support to facilitate their participation in the workshop. Requests for financial support should be

3 It will be made available in the course of June at http://www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access_workshop.html.
submitted to the UNECE secretariat (evelina.rioukhina@unece.org) as soon as possible, but not later than **16 May 2011. No application will be accepted after this deadline.** Due to the limited funds available, priority will be given to experts providing inputs to the workshop.

Participants requiring entry visas should inform the secretariat as soon as possible. The minimum amount of time needed for obtaining a visa is 15 working days since Switzerland is part of the Schengen zone since 2009. **Participants needing a visa are therefore requested to submit their application as soon as possible and to initiate visa procedures at least three weeks before the meeting.**

In accordance with United Nations accreditation procedures, participants are requested to complete the registration form available online at [http://www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access_workshop.html](http://www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access_workshop.html), and to transmit it to the UNECE secretariat **by 17 June 2011** either by fax (+ 41 22 917 0107) or e-mail (evelina.rioukhina@unece.org). On their way to the meeting, participants should obtain an identification badge at the Pass and Identification Unit of the United Nations Office at Geneva Security and Safety Section located at the Pregny Gate, 14 Avenue de la Paix (see map on the UNECE Water Convention website). Please allow time for this. In case of difficulty, please contact the secretariat by telephone at +41 22 917 1499.

Practical information on the Palais des Nations, as well as on transport and accommodation in Geneva, is available online at: [http://www.unece.org/meetings/practical.htm](http://www.unece.org/meetings/practical.htm).

Further information, the registration form and relevant material will be made available on the following website in due course at [http://www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access_workshop.html](http://www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access_workshop.html).

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