A healthy link
The Protocol on Water and Health and the Sustainable Development Goals
A healthy link: The Protocol on Water and Health and the Sustainable Development Goals
The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 as a next step in the world’s development agenda, seeking to improve on and take a stride further than the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that ended in 2015. The SDGs, universal and aspirational in nature, apply to all countries and all peoples of the world. This is a recognition that all nations have a responsibility to achieve sustainable development while leaving no-one behind.

The SDGs are more comprehensive than the MDGs with a total of 17 goals that expand on issues from the MDGs to include specific goals on water, energy, inequality and climate. These goals are strongly inter-connected, meaning that all goals depend on the success of the others. With a total of 169 targets, the SDGs cover many areas of sustainable development that are vital for the success of the global development agenda. Contrary to the MDGs, the SDGs are highly relevant for all countries across the pan-European region.
A unique aspect of the SDGs is that while the 17 goals and 169 targets are global, the targets each country commits to will need to be tailored to their own national-level realities. This is critical, because it takes into account the different levels of capacity and development, while respecting national policies and priorities.

The global community is committed and motivated to achieve the SDGs. The United Nations system, civil society, the scientific community and the private sector are ready to build a path, integrating across sectors, to achieve the SDGs. The road towards implementation has begun.
Water, sanitation and health are inseparably linked. Providing access to safe and sustainable drinking water and sanitation is essential to protect human health.

The water, sanitation and health agenda in the pan-European region remains unfinished. Every day 14 people die of diarrhoea due to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene. More than 60 million people in the region lack access to adequate sanitation facilities and 14 million people do not enjoy access to basic drinking water. The growing impacts of climate change, population growth and urbanization represent additional challenges to ensuring access to water and sanitation for all.

Safe and sustainable drinking water and sanitation are a cornerstone in creating healthy and resilient communities where people can work and children can learn. They lead to better nutrition and safer environments in both rural and urban settings. Better access also contributes to reducing inequalities between the rich and poor, the urban and the rural dwellers, the general population and marginalized groups, and to promoting gender equality. Without paying due attention to water and sanitation, most of the sustainable development agenda will not be achievable.
The Protocol on Water and Health

What is the Protocol?

The principal aim of the Protocol is to protect human health and well-being through better water management. This includes the protection of water ecosystems and the prevention, control and reduction of water-related diseases. Adopted in 1999 at the third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, the Protocol is the first international agreement of its kind designed specifically to attain an adequate supply of safe drinking water and sanitation for everyone, and effectively protect water resources. As of October 2016, there are 26 Parties to the Protocol covering approximately 60% of the pan-European population. A country does not need to be a Party to the mother Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes to become a Party to the Protocol.
What does the Protocol require?

To meet the Protocol's objectives, Parties are required to establish national and local targets linked to the entire water cycle such as for drinking water quality, wastewater discharge quality, water supply and wastewater treatment performance, the protection of waters used as a source of drinking water, as well as the reduction of different sources of pollution (see figure). Therefore, the Protocol is, in many respects, a precursor of SDG6 on water and sanitation.
Parties are also required to reduce outbreaks and the incidence of water-related
diseases. To this end, they need to establish, maintain or improve comprehensive
national and/or local surveillance and early warning systems to prevent and
effectively respond to such events. They also have to promote international
cooporation on these mechanisms.

The Protocol introduces a social component. It emphasizes the need for providing
equitable access to water for all members of the population, especially those who
suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion. Water resources management should
link social and economic development to the protection of natural ecosystems.

The Protocol: universal and intersectoral

The Protocol urges Parties to approach
water, sanitation and health in a holistic
manner, a pillar of sustainable development.
Through improving their water, health and
environmental situations, countries also
support and reinforce the benefits to many
other areas of development. For example,
having access to water, sanitation and
hygiene in educational facilities helps more
students attend school and increase their
learning. This has created positive, interlinked
and mutually supportive outcomes that
reduce poverty, address inequality and
promote sustainability.

The implementation of the Protocol is
intersectoral by nature. It encourages
governments to take a whole-of-government approach and fosters substantive
interaction between different sectors such as health, environment, agriculture,
water, education, finance and others to work together to achieve the national
targets set under the Protocol.
What have been the achievements of the Protocol?

While some parts of the pan-European region have had wide coverage of water and sanitation services in both urban and rural settings for some time, this is not the case for the entire region. One of the purposes of the Protocol is therefore to use a regional approach to help improve water and health outcomes for all Parties. By and large, this has been a success.

Based on the progress towards achieving the targets set by Parties over the last decade, the region has witnessed advancements in all areas of focus of the Protocol. Substantial progress has been achieved in almost all countries in terms of increased access to safe drinking water (see chart for the increased coverage for rural drinking water supply). More people than ever are connected to centralized or decentralized water supply systems. Many countries have scaled-up the use of water safety plans. The quality of water bodies has increased with sometimes impressive declines in both bacterial and chemical contaminants. Reports of outbreaks and incidences of water-related diseases have also diminished.

The establishment and improvement of effective monitoring and reporting systems helped create an iterative process of monitoring, evaluation and learning that informs implementation towards achieving the targets of the Protocol.

Tangible progress can be made when there is political will combined with an integrated, intersectoral strategy. The Protocol has made this possible by providing a hub for capacity building and professional training across the region and by promoting a deeper understanding of the relationship between water, sanitation and health. In addition, the Protocol encourages the uptake of internationally recognized tools and approaches in regulation, management (water safety plans and sanitation safety plans) and surveillance, both in policy and practice.
Even though the Protocol has been a success, much work remains. The MDG on sanitation has not been met, problems of equity persist throughout the pan-European region and climate change threatens progress on water, sanitation and health. This is where the coupling of the Protocol and the SDGs makes for an opportunity for effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
Protocol on Water and Health linkages to the SDGs

The Protocol on Water and Health and the programme of activities developed under its framework link very closely with the majority of the SDGs. The Protocol specifically helps progressive implementation of internationally agreed development goals through an already-existing regional mechanism. It supports countries in setting targets and thereby can translate and operationalize the SDGs in national contexts depending on their capacities and prioritized issues. With certain SDGs, like that of water and sanitation, the link is explicit, but other goals are also inherently supported by the implementation of the Protocol and its programme of work.

The Protocol promotes equal access to a safe and sustainable drinking water supply and basic sanitation services for all, and in particular for the poor and most vulnerable (Target 1.4).

Water, sanitation and hygiene are inextricably linked with nutrition. Children are not able to take full benefit from nutrition due to lack of safe access to water and sanitation services. The Protocol’s improvement of integrated WASH systems helps end malnutrition (Target 2.2).

One of the primary goals of the Protocol is to reduce the scale of outbreaks and incidents of water-related diseases (Target 3.3). The Protocol also focuses on identifying and remediating contaminated sites to improve the quality of water bodies and reduce the number of water-related diseases from those polluted sources (Target 3.9). Improved water and sanitation services at the household level and in health care facilities, as promoted by the Protocol, reduce preventable deaths in newborns and children under the age of 5 (Target 3.2). The Protocol requires surveillance and early warning systems to be in put in place to monitor incidences and outbreaks of water-related diseases (Target 3.d).
Education cannot be inclusive and equitable without providing a safe learning environment, including proper water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. The Protocol helps to improve attention, action and information towards improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene in educational facilities, thereby promoting safe and effective learning environments for all (Target 4.a). At the same time, it promotes learners’ awareness on the importance of water, sanitation and health (Target 4.7).

The Protocol’s work on gender equality related to water, sanitation and health is expanding, but already focuses on promoting women’s participation in decision-making processes related to water and health (Target 5.5). The Protocol also provides gender-sensitive solutions resulting in less discrimination in access to water, sanitation and hygiene services (Target 5.1).

The Protocol explicitly focuses on providing safe and sustainable drinking water and sanitation (Targets 6.1 and 6.2), as well as creating healthy environments for people and ecosystems (Target 6.6). It directly links with all aspects of the SDG target on water and sanitation, comprising the entire water cycle, from source to use (Targets 6.4 and 6.5), to wastewater reuse (Target 6.3).

Equitable access to water and sanitation services has long been the backbone of the Protocol, without discrimination, ensuring that legislation, policies and action all provide equal opportunity for even the most vulnerable (Target 10.3). Through its inclusive process of public participation and consultation, the Protocol attempts to create a level playing field for all stakeholders (Target 10.2).
The Protocol’s promotion of collective water and sanitation systems, urban water management and the closing of water cycles helps to achieve more liveable and healthy cities, in a resource-efficient manner (Target 11.b). In addition, the Protocol, at its core, promotes affordable water and sanitation services (Target 11.1) and resilient water and sanitation services to reduce deaths and the number of people affected in water-related disasters (Target 11.5).

The core purpose of the Protocol is to make environments healthier for people to live in, which is carried out through promoting the reduction of wastewater discharges and the increase of treated wastewater, while maintaining guidelines for both providing safe drinking water and safe wastewater reuse (Target 12.4).

Climate change poses a risk to health from extreme events. It impacts water and sanitation systems and creates health hazards related to food production changes and disease-carrying vectors and rodents. The Protocol aims to create drinking water and sanitation systems and services that are more resilient to the effects of climate change (Target 13.1).

Freshwater ecosystems provide healthy living environments and resources for food and energy. Protecting and restoring these areas can maintain and improve ecosystem and human health. The Protocol advances this in practice through measuring the effectiveness of managing water resources and reducing pollution (Target 15.1).
Through its approach of setting targets, implementation and review, the Protocol promotes effective planning, performance and accountability, thereby strengthening national and local institutions (Target 16.6). Moreover, its strong provisions on public participation promote responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (Target 16.7).

The Protocol enhances policy coherence (Target 17.14) and promotes multi-stakeholder partnerships to help countries achieve their water- and health-related targets (Targets 17.16 and 17.17). The Protocol activities build capacity to improve data, monitoring and accountability for water and health (Target 17.18).
The Protocol as a mechanism to implement the SDGs

One of the unique aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals is that national governments will implement them through setting national targets and developing national implementation plans, which are tailored to their priorities and capacities, in conjunction with establishing monitoring and reporting frameworks, governance mechanisms and partnerships for implementation.

The Protocol has long-standing experience in target-setting – a process that each Party is required to go through upon ratification. Transparency, accountability and public participation are building blocks of this process. The Protocol guides Parties through a progression of steps that is comprehensive, consultative and inclusive. With this the Protocol provides a clear framework for translating and operationalizing global commitments into national contexts.

The Protocol’s target-setting framework has resulted in successful implementation with positive results towards improving water, sanitation and health. From stakeholder engagement to establishing and enhancing national intersectoral coordination platforms, the Parties to the Protocol have gained a rich set of lessons learned and best practices that transfer well to SDG implementation.

Along with a programme of work that aligns very well with the SDGs, the Protocol also offers many practical tools which will assist with their achievement.

Monitoring and reporting of the progress of the SDGs is a key element of whether they will succeed or fail. Having a robust framework in place will show where progress has been made and where gaps persist so as to reinforce efforts in those areas. The Protocol, with its already comprehensive monitoring and reporting tool established, can be utilized to monitor the implementation of SDG targets related to water, sanitation and health.
The 2030 Agenda focuses on multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote and implement the SDGs. This is critical to successful implementation, especially with a focus on the integration of the different targets for which competence lies with different sectors. The Protocol has a long tradition and strength in developing such partnerships across sectors to foster development of joint strategies, as well as to exchange experiences and share knowledge at the regional level, conduct peer-to-peer learning and capacity-building and provide mutual assistance. The relationships built, structures established and ongoing coordination through the Protocol will prove highly valuable towards the implementation of the SDGs.

The world is at an important moment as it sets off to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs provide an ambitious scope and level of aspiration that has not been seen before. This requires capitalising on already existing multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms to assist with an efficient and effective transition. The Protocol on Water and Health provides valuable experience, concrete tools and a successful platform to help propel the implementation of the SDGs forward in an inclusive manner.
Joint Secretariat to the Protocol on Water and Health

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
www.unece.org/env/water/
E-mail: protocol.water_health@unece.org

WHO Regional Office for Europe
E-mail: euwatsan@who.int

Palais des Nations
CH - 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland
Telephone: +41(0)22 917 44 44
Fax: +41(0)22 917 05 05
E-mail: info.ece@unece.org
Website: http://www.unece.org