The Water Convention

The Water Convention's central aim is to strengthen local, national and regional measures within the UNECE region to protect and ensure the quality, quantity and sustainable use of transboundary water resources.

The Convention takes a holistic approach based on the understanding that water resources play a crucial part in ecosystems as well as in human societies and economies. Its commitment to integrated water resources management replaces an earlier focus on localized sources of pollution and management of separate components of the ecosystems.

The Convention requires countries to fulfil certain obligations, from the general to the practical. These include:

- To prevent, control and reduce adverse transboundary impacts on the environment, human health and socio-economic conditions
- To preserve and restore ecosystems
- To manage shared waters in a reasonable and equitable manner using the ecosystem approach and guided by the precautionary principle and the polluter-pays principle
- To carry out environmental impact assessments, to draw up contingency plans, set water-quality objectives and minimize the risk of accidental water pollution

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Keys to success

The Water Convention provides a sound legal framework for cooperation on shared water resources in the UNECE region. It delivers authoritative expertise and advice on strategic and technical issues, and provides countries with guidance on such matters as drafting new agreements, modelling existing ones, establishing joint bodies, flood safety, food management, and pollution prevention and response.

The Convention requires Parties to enter into specific bilateral or multilateral agreements and to create institutions – joint bodies such as river and lake commissions – to meet these responsibilities.

The water is destined to be the critical resource of our century, and perhaps the millennium. In Europe and Asia, as in much of the world, the demand for clean water continues to increase while the supply diminishes. The impacts of climate change on the hydrological cycle will be much more dramatic in the Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea regions of Central Asia, where water resources are already stretched to their limits. In many areas of the world, water-related disasters are increasing in frequency and scaling up to become more frequent and devastating floods than ever before.

The economic and social costs of water mismanagement and water-related disasters are soaring in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region. More than 150 major rivers and 50 large lakes in the UNECE region run along or straddle the borders between two or more countries. Over 170 transboundary aquifers have been identified in the region and more are expected to be identified.

Nearly one third of Europe’s 730 million people live in countries already suffering from high levels of water stress. In the UNECE region (56 countries), an estimated 130 million people do not have access to safe drinking water.

About UNECE

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), one of the five United Nations regional commissions, was set up in 1947. It provides a regional forum for governments from Europe, North America, Central Asia and beyond to study the economic, environmental and technological problems of the region and recommend courses of action.

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http://www.unece.org/env/water/
Building capacity
Transboundary water management requires broad experience, competence and skills in many disciplines, from basic and applied sciences to management, negotiation, diplomacy, and conflict resolution. The UNECE Capacity for Water Cooperation (CWC) project is designed to improve the ability of experts and officials in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia to manage their transboundary waters and to create a network of shared experience of experience between host countries and countries. It does this by exchanging partnerships on topics such as the impact of transboundary commissions, information management and public participation, implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health, and joint monitoring and assessment. A UNECE project is developing a regional cooperative agreement for Central Asia on dam safety. The project is helping countries to revise and harmonize their national laws and implement measures to safeguard the river basin for the future. It has already resulted in the development of legislation and institutions which have improved safety in the subregion.

Guiding implementation
Both Parties and non-Parties can request assistance to carry out and implement the Convention. This service is particularly important to countries with economies in transition. When Georgia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia decided to unite the Convention, they asked the UNECE secretariat for help. They especially needed advice on how to address the legal, practical and economic aspects of integration. The response was a practical guide on ratification and implementation of the Convention. The guidance helps the legal and technical aspects of the Convention. It is coupled with concrete examples of good practice, while offering general advice applicable to local situations. It is intended as a practical tool responding to country-specific needs.

Brokendown in Central Asia
In the Convention, the sharing of water resources between ascending and descending countries, is particularly problematic, generating tensions and insecurity. In a remarkable example of cooperation, and supported by UNECE and other partners, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan inaugurated the Cha-Tauki Commission in 2006. UNECE will continue to help the countries involved to develop a joint plan that would be ambitious but not unrealistic. The first ever in-depth assessment of transboundary waters in the UNECE region was carried out under the Water Convention from 2003 to 2007, involving over 100 experts from the whole region. The assessment covers 140 transboundary rivers and 34 transboundary lakes in the European and Asian parts of the region and is the result of joint actions at local, national, regional and international levels. The assessment was published in the form of a progress report, which included 11 recommendations, including the need for transboundary cooperation and institution-building.

Reducing industrial accidents
Industrial accidents can have impacts far from their site, polluting the air, soil and water. Parties to the Convention agreed on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents (TEIA) project to work together on the prevention of industrial accidents and to promote the exchange of information on the state of their shared waters and the effectiveness of measures taken to address transboundary impacts. The first-ever test of the Convention’s implementation of transboundary water management was the 2005 Danube flood in the UNECE region. The Convention facilitated the exchange of information and the coordination of emergency response efforts.

Assessing waters
The Water Convention obliges countries to jointly monitor and assess the state of their shared waters and the effectiveness of measures taken to address transboundary impacts. Specific technical and strategic guidelines on monitoring and assessment of transboundary waters were developed to translate this crucial obligation into practice. The guidelines provide the basis for a number of pilot projects on shared river, lake, and groundwater basins to jointly define information needs and design monitoring systems. The first ever transboundary assessment of transboundary waters in the UNECE region was carried out under the Water Convention. The assessment covered 140 transboundary rivers and 34 transboundary lakes in the European and Asian parts of the region, and its results were used to inform the development of the Convention’s framework.

Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change
The Water Convention has influenced the work of many joint bodies developed under the Water Convention includes ways to assess and prompted the establishment of several new ones. Examples include the commissions for the rivers Elbe, Danube, Meuse, Oder and Scheldt, and for lakes Geneva, Ohrid, and Peipsi. The Convention has expanded its activity in Central Asia. Since 2009, UNECE participates in the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. This includes a number of projects aimed at supporting implementation of the Convention in the region.

Valuing ecosystems
Parties to the Water Convention acknowledged the importance and value of ecosystems with their decision to promote the integrated management of their waters. Since 2006, “Payment for Ecosystem Services” has been a priority of the Convention, and its work focused on the development of policy, legal and institutional arrangements under the Convention.

Adapting to climate change
Climate change is already affecting ecosystems in the UNECE region. Floods, droughts, ground water and sea level changes are increasing in number and severity. Water supplies are being threatened and vulnerable habitats are being destroyed. Wholesoap attempts to reverse climate trends are under way, but adaptation may be the only practical response. However, very few countries have developed adaptation strategies and those that exist are limited to the national level. There are essential tools for transboundary basins.

The Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change developed under the Water Convention includes ways to assess climate impacts, mitigate floods and droughts through integrated water resource management and appropriate transboundary cooperation, and adjust policies and strategies related to transboundary water management. The Convention also works on transboundary flood management, for example on exchange of experience between EU and non-EU countries, and on the development of a sound legal basis for flood management.

Fostering dialogue
Countries of the UNECE region can benefit from the Convention to improve the integrated management of their waters. Since 2006, “Payment for Ecosystem Services” has been a priority of the Convention, and its work focused on the development of policy, legal and institutional arrangements under the Convention. The Convention has expanded its activity in Central Asia. Since 2009, UNECE participates in the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. This includes a number of projects aimed at supporting implementation of the Convention in the region.

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Breaking down the Convention’s implementation
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Attending dangers
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