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UNECE WELCOMES THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S INTENTION TO RATIFY THE AARHUS AND ESPOO ENVIRONMENTAL CONVENTIONS

The secretariat of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe warmly welcomes the recent announcements by the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, that the Russian Government will ratify two important UNECE environmental conventions: the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (known as the Espoo Convention) and the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (known as the Aarhus Convention).

Ján Kubiš, UNECE Executive Secretary said: "I was delighted to read President Medvedev's declarations. The processes laid down in the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions will contribute to help the Russian authorities improve environmental management. As demonstrated in the case of the Nord Stream gas pipeline project, these will also contribute to increased dialogue and cooperation with neighbouring countries on important infrastructure projects. This is a very positive development for our entire region".

The Russian President's announcements follow a recent seminar between the European Union and the Russian Federation to review the application of the Espoo

Convention to the Nord Stream gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea. That seminar was followed by a meeting between UNECE and the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, at which the company declared its readiness to notify and consult neighbouring States about its nuclear power plans within the framework of the Convention.



The announcements are very timely for both Conventions. Espoo Convention governments met in Geneva last week for the fifth Meeting of the Parties to that Convention. Coincidentally, Parties to the Aarhus Convention will meet this week, in Chisinau, Moldova, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the entry into force of that Convention.

As a member State the Russian Federation plays an important role in a number of UNECE processes, such as the UNECE's Committee on Sustainable Energy and the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy. The UNECE secretariat is looking forward to the positive contribution the Russian Federation will make as party to the Espoo and Aarhus Conventions once the ratification processes are complete. The UNECE secretariat notes the valuable contribution made already in these processes over a number of years by the Russian civil society. □

WORKSHOP ON EQUITABLE ACCESS TO WATER AND SANITATION

GENEVA, 4-5 JULY 2011

The workshop on equitable access to water and sanitation organized 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, will be held in Geneva on 4-5 July 2011.

Different stakeholders 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, including governmental representatives, water and health managers, local authorities and representatives of academia, research institutes, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, will meet with the aim to exchange information and discuss good practices on how to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation for all.

The access to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation was declared by the United Nations General Assembly as a human right essential to the full enjoyment of life and all other human rights (GA/10967 adopted on 28 July 2010). In addition, the Human Rights Council affirmed that the right to water and sanitation is contained in existing human

rights treaties, and that States have the primary responsibility to ensure its full realization.

Yet, in the pan-European region there are 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.

The participants in the workshop will discuss specific challenges and debate the political, economic and practical implications of equitable access to water and sanitation. The workshop will contribute to identify good practices,

success factors and lessons learned and will be an important step forward in the process of promoting equitable access to water and sanitation. □

For more information, please visit: http://www.unece.org/env/water/meetings/equitable_access_workshop.html or contact Francesca Bernardini at: francesca.bernardini@unece.org.

UNECE EXPERTS HELP RUSSIA'S VORONEZH REGION BOOST SEED POTATO PRODUCTION



Agronomist Rudolf Schwärzel, Agroscope Changins-Wädenswil Research Station, Switzerland (left) and Rimma Usacheva, Ramon' -Agro (right) testing for viral contamination

UNECE seed potato experts visited Voronezh again this month to assess the quality of the seed potato growing crop and train the producers in identifying and eliminating plants attacked by viruses, bacteria and other diseases, especially virus Y, which is the most severe virus affecting plant production. These visits are part of a campaign by the Specialized Section on Seed Potatoes to promote UNECE's international seed potato standard in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Last July, the experts visited fields of both seed and consumption potatoes, where they met growers, quarantine officers, certification authorities and regional administration officials. To improve the quality of locally produced seed and protect the region from contaminated imports, the experts recommended purchasing and planting only high quality seed. They also recommended that a testing laboratory be set up.

The laboratory was built and became operational shortly afterwards. Staff has been trained in how to conduct the tests and all of the seed lots were tested before planting. In spring this year, the fields under seed potatoes were planted with high-quality tested seed, away from potential sources of contamination.

Another expert visit is planned for July to determine which crop can be harvested for seed and which for consumption. □

For more information, please visit: <http://live.unece.org/trade/agr/welcomee.html> or contact Serguei Malanitchev at: serguei.malanitchev@unece.org.

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS ADDRESSES DATA NEEDS OF 21ST CENTURY

The heads of 56 national statistical offices and 16 international organizations came together at the meeting of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) on 14-16 June 2011 in Geneva to address emerging global information needs.

Only about 10 years ago, data were scarce and were collected mainly through surveys. Now data are everywhere but interpreting and making good use of them is a difficult task. Statistical offices face a challenge of how to turn these data masses into meaningful information.

The Conference discussed how to change the products and processes in statistical offices to make use of the "data overflow" and provide better service for data users. Reorganization of data collection is taking place in many countries due to the increasing demand for statistics and related need for efficiency gains.

Many statistical offices are reorganising their work and moving towards increased use of internet-based questionnaires and more automated data collection. A common format for automatic exchange of data between statistical offices and international organizations (the SDMX standard) is gaining ground. It is being tested in several statistical areas allowing access to the vast data resources of

national and international statistical agencies through a common data hub.



Another topic of focus was measuring human capital, i.e. the skills, capabilities and knowledge of people. Human capital is a major driver of economic growth and productivity. Data on human capital can help to analyse competitiveness of national economies, performance of the education and health sector, sustainability, how society prepares for an aging population, etc. But there are no internationally comparable official statistics on the topic so far. The Conference agreed on the next steps towards achieving a wider consensus on how to measure this complex issue.

This year, the Conference endorsed two guidebooks of global importance: the practical guide on the Impact of Globalization on National Accounts and the second edition of the Canberra Group Handbook on Household Income Statistics.

A driving force in developing methodological standards, guidelines and recommendations, the Conference attracts participation beyond the UNECE region, with Australia, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Chile and Brazil actively participating in its work. □

For more information please visit: <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2011.06.ces.html> or contact Tiina Luige at: support.stat@unece.org.

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