



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

4 and 5 July 2011, Palais des Nations, Salle IX

Opening Remarks by Mr. Ján Kubiš

Equitable access to water and sanitation throughout the UNECE region: Obligations under the UNECE/WHO-Europe Protocol on Water and Health

- Speaking on behalf of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, as well as our partner in the joint secretariat, the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization, I would like to warmly welcome you in Geneva to the workshop on equitable access to water and sanitation, organized in the framework of the UNECE/WHO-Europe Protocol on Water and Health,
- Access to safe water and, even more, access to adequate sanitation are still a challenge in the pan-European region — where about 140 million persons do not have access to safe, healthy water in their homes and more than 13,000 children under the age of 14 die every year from water-related diarrhoea. The situation is particularly critical in countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. This subregion is among the few in the world at risk of not achieving the water-related Millennium Development Goal targets.
- While the MDG targets on access to water and sanitation call for halving the proportion of the population without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015, the Protocol on Water and Health does not stop at a 50 per cent reduction. It requires that Parties ultimately ensure universal access to water and sanitation, within time frames tailored to the country situation and capacity.
- Moreover the Protocol clearly states that “equitable access to water, adequate in terms of both quantity and quality, should be provided for all members of the population, especially those who suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion” and that “special consideration should be given to the protection of people who are particularly vulnerable to water-related diseases”. Thus the Protocol requires Parties to look beyond averages, to examine in-country disparities and to ensure that the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not overlooked.
- Both the aim to ensure universal access and the commitment to ensure equality and non-discrimination in access unite the Protocol and the human right to water and sanitation. 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 are crucial milestones and have significant implications for Governments and populations. Parties to the Protocol can take advantage of the Protocol’s provisions and framework to translate this human right into practice.

- In particular, the Protocol requires the setting of targets along with target dates in areas covering the entire water cycle, to develop measures to achieve them, and to regularly assess progress. Through setting such targets, Parties can focus on the different aspects of the human right to water — in particular on equity of access — and develop integrated measures to address them. The process of setting targets is not only contributing to the development of concerted national actions; it also creates a platform for cooperation among various stakeholders from the water, environment and health communities and other actors in society. This stakeholder perspective helps to take account of and address the needs of all groups of society, including the vulnerable ones.
- It should be clear that this workshop does not aim to address all aspects related to the human right to water and sanitation, but rather to focus on specific problems linked to inequities that are of concern in our region. Indeed, while increasing overall access to water and sanitation is of concern mainly in the eastern part of the UNECE region, in particular in countries with economies in transition, the issue of “equitable access” needs to be addressed in all countries.
- Throughout the region, there are groups in society which do not benefit from access to water and sanitation comparable to that of other groups. A major inequity is related simply to the place where people live: in many countries people living in rural areas have significantly lower levels of access to safe water and improved sanitation. Another major inequity is related to socio-cultural differences: people belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups (such as Roma and Travellers, ethnic minorities, migrants, illegal settlers, slum dwellers, or people with disabilities) often face additional barriers to access compared with ordinary citizens. A further inequity is related to socio-economic factors: for people with low incomes, the regular price of water and sanitation services may be unaffordable and prevent them from enjoying a basic level of services.
- Furthermore, geographical, financial and social differences are closely interlinked. For instance, those living in rural areas often do not dispose of the same income, in relative terms, as urban dwellers and can therefore be faced with the compound problems of affordability of water and sanitation services and lower levels of access to them.
- There are constraints to consider, in particular financial constraints. The growing levels of poverty throughout the region, including in its western part, will result in pressures on household incomes available for water and sanitation. At the same time, cost recovery of water and sanitation services is being progressively introduced in the region and in many cases this translates into increases in water tariffs, which might result in an increasing number of persons that are not able to afford the price of water. Therefore, special measures, including both tariffs and social measures, need to be put into place to ensure the affordability of water and sanitation.
- Thus if water and sanitation for all is to be achieved, special attention needs to be paid to redress inequities early on, because general progress will not trickle down and benefit everyone. To that end, specific measures need to be put in place; otherwise aggregate human development progress might occur at the expense of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations, thereby potentially exacerbating underlying inequalities.
- The main objectives of this workshop are to discuss how to ensure that access to water and sanitation is equitable in the UNECE region; to examine what policy and measures have already been put in place, how they have been designed and what the results have been; and to look at the challenges going forward as well as the lessons learned.

- The hope of the organizers, including UNECE, is that such examples will demonstrate that action is possible. And that it will inspire policy and decision makers — at the national and local levels — private and public operators, as well as NGOs, international donors and other concerned actors to replicate existing approaches and to put in place additional measures. I would like to encourage you to make the best use of the exchange of experiences in the coming two days, in this rather unique setting bringing together experts from very different sectors: politicians, national and local authorities, water operators, the private sector, academia, human rights experts, NGOs and civil society, to ensure that no one is left behind from benefiting from access to water and sanitation.
- Before concluding, I would like to sincerely thank the French Government for the leadership and support in this area of work and in the organization of the workshop. It is a leadership with a clear political vision that has been translated into many concrete measures at the national level and from which there is much to be learned.
- I would also like to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. The partnership with OHCHR and the Special Rapporteur is crucial to increase awareness on the issue, to encourage public debate through workshops such as this one, and ultimately to ensure compliance with the legally binding requirements of both the Protocol and the human rights treaties.
- There will be many other occasions in the coming months to further the debate. First of all the “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference which will focus on the sustainable management of water and water-related ecosystems. Secondly, there will be the sixth World Water Forum in Marseille next spring, where the document on good practices for equitable access that is being produced under the Protocol, also on the basis of the outcome of this workshop, will be launched. Finally, there is the Rio+ 20 Conference, where water will be considered for its role in greening the economy. Your discussions will feed into these wider processes.
- I therefore wish you all a very stimulating and productive workshop. Thank you for your attention.