

**Briefing for permanent missions on the fifth session of the Meeting of
the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health**

Opening address

**Ms. Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

Palais des Nations, Room IX, 14 May 2019, 4.00 pm

Ambassador Zlatanović, Excellencies, Distinguished colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Agenda 2030, with its ambitious and integrated vision, constitutes the strongest global political commitment to sustainable development. Water and sanitation are a cornerstone of this commitment. SDG 6 calls for clean water and sanitation for all by 2030.

Yet, in the pan-European region, about 21 million people still do not enjoy access to basic drinking-water service, and 57 million people do not have piped water at home. 36 million people do not enjoy access to basic sanitation and 328 thousand people, mostly in small rural settings, still practise open defecation. Water scarcity and pollution, including emerging contaminants, are common challenges that threaten human health, ecosystems and social and economic development.

Adopted in 1999 and jointly serviced by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the Protocol on Water and Health is in many respects a precursor of SDG 6.

By supporting the setting of national targets and monitoring progress, the Protocol has been *the* tool for the pan-European region to translate SDG 6 and other related SDGs - such as SDG 3 on health; 4 on education; 10 on inequalities,

11 on cities and 13 on climate - into national contexts, tailored to national capacities and priorities.

The Protocol has a very strong focus on equity issues, including geographical inequities between rural and urban areas, affordability concerns and problems of access by specific population groups or in specific settings, such as schools and health care facilities. It has supported countries in addressing structural and technical problems hampering access to water, sanitation and hygiene, and to achieve sustainable water management.

As such, the Protocol and the 2030 Agenda are mutually reinforcing.

Let me give you a few examples of impact.

Water, sanitation and health problems are often linked to governance, to weak institutional frameworks and a lack of intersectoral cooperation. The Protocol has supported the development of interministerial coordination mechanisms and of clear and integrated action plans on water, sanitation and health. By now, almost all Parties have developed national time-bound targets, which guide their efforts in this area.

The Protocol has improved countries' surveillance capacity to control and prevent water-related diseases. This gives a clear view of prevailing and emerging water-related diseases and outbreaks, which is necessary to avert negative impact on human health from poor water and sanitation management.

The Protocol has also improved the quality of existing services. Having a water tap on the premises is good, but does not guarantee safety, adequacy or reliability. The presence of a toilet does not guarantee environmentally sound disposal and reuse of human waste. It is critically important to ensure universal access to safe systems along the entire service chain. The policy response, spearheaded by WHO, is to adopt water and sanitation safety plans, which are globally accepted as the public health benchmark. The Protocol has been the European hub for promoting and supporting this risk-based management

approach in policy and practice. It will be even more so in the future, as this approach is mainstreamed in the EU legislation on drinking water.

The Protocol has also focused on leaving no one behind. Since 2011, it has done ground-breaking work on the human rights to water and sanitation. It has directly assisted numerous governments in applying an “equity lens”, to ensure that these rights are guaranteed to all, including people living in poverty, rural residents, and vulnerable or marginalized groups. Moving from assessment to concrete actions, countries have made tangible progress in ensuring water and sanitation for all.

A key asset of the Protocol is its institutional framework, with the Meeting of the Parties as the highest decision-making body. It represents *the* high-level policy platform for the region to discuss water, health and environmental issues, where countries, organizations and other key stakeholders discuss progress, main challenges and priorities for future. It meets every three years.

The 5th session of the Meeting of the Parties will take place in Belgrade from 19 to 21 November 2019. It will discuss how to achieve the water-and health-related SDGs and other regional commitments, such as the Ostrava Declaration on Environment and Health. Other topics include the safe management of water and sanitation services in the light of climate change, and emerging and traditional water-related health concerns in the region, for example the rapid spread of anti-microbial resistance.

A main outcome of the Meeting will be the adoption of the programme of work for the next 3 years.

Activities will continue to assist Parties and other States and actors to address key challenges, including improving governance; preventing and reducing water-related disease; water in institutional settings (such as schools and health care facilities); sanitation and hygiene; small-scale water supplies and sanitation; safe and efficient management of water supply and sanitation systems;

equitable access to water and sanitation; increasing resilience to climate change; assistance to support implementation.

The Meeting will also elect some members to the Compliance Committee. Instructions for proposing candidates were recently disseminated.

I invite all countries, Parties and non-Parties, as well as partners with a stake and interest in water, health and environment issues, to participate at high level in Belgrade.

The high-level segment on 18 November will be a key opportunity for Ministers and other decision-makers to shape the future trajectory of water and health in our region.

I take this opportunity to sincerely thank Serbia for its continuing leadership under the Protocol and for organizing this important event. By hosting the Meeting of the Parties, the Republic of Serbia demonstrates its key role in promoting and supporting the Protocol's objectives in the region.

I also thank the colleagues from the WHO Regional Office for Europe for the excellent cooperation between our two organizations. At a time when the UN system focuses on delivering as one and promoting cross-sectoral integration, the Protocol and the joint-secretariat are certainly outstanding examples of what the UN system can do through good cooperation.

I am sure I speak also on behalf of my WHO colleagues: We look forward to working closely with Serbian colleagues and all other delegations in preparing for the Meeting of the Parties.

Thank you.