

PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH

ENSURING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO WATER AND SANITATION

The Protocol on Water and Health aims to ensure, by linking water management and health issues, the supply of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone. The Protocol provides a sound framework for the translation of the human right to water and sanitation into practice, in particular through the setting of specific targets and target dates in a number of areas — covering, among others, access to water and sanitation, quality of drinking water and performance of water supply and sanitation services — access to information, public participation and accountability provisions. The Protocol specifically commits its Parties to promote equitable access to water and sanitation – Article 5 (l) states that “equitable access to water, adequate in terms both of quantity and of quality, should be provided for all members of the population, especially those who suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion”.

The publication *No one left behind. Good practices to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation in the pan-European region* provides examples of how different countries have attempted to reduce inequities in access to water and sanitation services – in order to inspire policymakers, but also practitioners, civil society and private sector organizations.



WHY PAYING ATTENTION TO EQUITABLE ACCESS IS IMPORTANT

A person may lack access to water and sanitation simply because there is no access to safe water and sanitation in the community – whether due to the degradation of water resources or more commonly to lack of or poor management of water and sanitation infrastructure. In many cases, even though a community may have access to water and sanitation services, vulnerable and marginalized members of the community do not enjoy them. In some cases people have access but cannot afford to pay the water and sanitation bill without curtailing consumption of other basic goods and services. If special attention is not paid to these different dimensions of equitable access, there is a serious risk that certain gaps in access will become entrenched and that the human right to water and sanitation will not be realized.

STEERING GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS TO ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS

Good water governance and management can go a long way towards achieving equitable access objectives – examples include transparency and access to information, inclusive participation of stakeholders in decision-making, incentives for operators to improve efficiencies and keep costs down, and accountability and redress mechanisms effectively accessible to all people. But that is unlikely to be enough. Applying an “equitable access lens” is needed to speed up progress. This requires a results-oriented action plan building on country situation analysis and context-specific equity indicators.



REDUCING GEOGRAPHICAL DISPARITIES



According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/World Health Organization (WHO) Joint Monitoring Programme, access to improved water and sanitation solutions in rural areas in the pan-European region is 10 % lower than for urban areas. Access and price gaps between geographical areas can be attributed to underlying cost structures but also to political influence and decisions. Reducing access gaps requires a combination of political, financial and technical efforts. Public policies can reduce price disparities between geographical areas by targeting investment programmes and subsidies to areas with higher costs of service, enabling cross-subsidization from high-income low-cost areas to low-income high-cost areas, and promoting efficiency and rational prices through sector organization reform and the use of information tools such as benchmarking and tariff reference values.

ENSURING ACCESS FOR VULNERABLE AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS

There are many vulnerable and marginalized groups, each with their own needs and facing different barriers to achieving equitable access, and thus requiring differentiated solutions. The access barriers may be due to services not adapted to the special physical needs of certain persons (such as the disabled), due to services not being adequately available in the institutions that certain persons rely on (such as schools, prisons or refugee camps), due to some persons not having private facilities (such as the homeless), and due to some persons living in non-sanitary housing conditions and being denied access to water and sanitation due to unintended or intended discrimination practices (such as some ethnic minorities and illegal settlers). Policy-makers and all the actors involved in policy implementation, namely regulatory agencies, asset-holders and service providers (whether public or private), need to dedicate time and targeted financial resources to review whether vulnerable and marginalized groups are being included, and that their particular needs are being taken into account. In many cases, adequate solutions require an integrated response combining policies and ensuring collaboration across public agencies.



KEEPING WATER AND SANITATION AFFORDABLE FOR ALL



Affordability is a common and increasing concern in the pan-European region, although with differences among countries, and thus it demands adopting in each country a long-term strategy and specific policies. Relying only on tariff design is not enough to ensure affordability; social tariffs and social protection measures are also required. The criteria to select policy tools should include their effectiveness in reaching the target groups and their administrative complexity. The options to address affordability concerns will demand financing from other water users or from tax-payers, and will be influenced by the existence of "social policy infrastructure" and by the broader water governance.

<http://www.unece.org/env/water>

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