

After historic ratification, European countries meet for the first time to improve water management and curb water-related diseases

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On 17 January 2007, the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes are meeting in Geneva for the first time. Their goal is to translate into action the Protocol's provisions for the coming three years. The meeting is expected to launch ambitious programmes to prevent, control and reduce water-related diseases.

"This meeting of the Protocol Parties represents a key step of a process intended to increase the number of European citizens with access to safe drinking-water and basic sanitation," says Dr. Roberto Bertolini, Director of the Special Programme for Health and Environment of the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe. "Access to safe water is a basic human right ensuring the physical and social well-being of populations, but it is still not attained in today's Europe. How can we accept to lose 37 of our children to diarrhoea each day for lack of access to safe water? We therefore call on all countries to be bold in the adoption of an Action Plan that will significantly reduce the current water-related disease burden."

"Water on tap is taken for granted in the developed world, but the truth is that over 100 million Europeans still do not have access to safe drinking water. Such a situation is unacceptable at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Moreover, especially in the poorest part of our region, the quality of water is declining," says Kaj Bärlund, Director of the Environment, Housing and Land Management Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). "Water is a renewable resource with a limited capacity to recover from unsustainable human activities. Any failure to respect those limits today will have a high cost in terms of health and well-being tomorrow. If we do not want to hold back human development, concrete actions need to be taken."

The programmes to be decided on at the meeting include activities related to the setting of targets under the Protocol and the report on progress achieved; surveillance of water-related disease and response systems; the human right to water and equitable access to safe drinking water; water supply and sanitation and climate change adaptation strategies; and public awareness and capacity-building activities.

Transboundary water resources play a vital role in the region: it has several hundred transboundary water bodies, including rivers, lakes and groundwaters, and countries depend on their neighbours for up to 90% of their water. Thus international cooperation is crucial to ensure the sustainable use of such resources.

The spread of diseases transmitted by water is especially common in Eastern Europe, where 16% of the population still has no access to home drinking water. Over 170,000 cases of water-related diseases were reported in 2006, including cases of viral hepatitis A (over 120,000), Shigella bloody

diarrhoea (almost 40,000), enterohaemorrhagic Escherichia coli infection (over 7,000) and typhoid fever (almost 6,000)[ii].

An epidemic of morbidity from water-related diseases is ongoing in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.[iii] More than half the rural population lacks a continuous supply of safe water and/or an adequate sanitation system. Many people drink and use water from wells, which is often contaminated. Most households have their own wells, and toilets are often located too close to the wells and on higher ground so that they pollute the wells. Disposal of wastewater in villages is an urgent problem, and household waste is typically just dumped on a river bank or near a road.

Where people in these countries – whether in rural areas or in cities – do have a supply of drinking water, it is often of poor quality and only available for a few hours a day. Poor water quality is linked to poor sanitation, which leads to microbiological and chemical contamination. As a consequence, water-related diseases take an unacceptable toll in the European region and can easily lead to disease outbreaks, which spread quickly due to inadequate hygiene and sanitation.

In Western Europe there is growing awareness of the importance of emerging diseases and new challenges posed by global change. Projected more frequent heavy rainfalls, increased periods of drought in the Mediterranean and water stress in other regions, and global temperature increases in seas, lakes and rivers – all of these may affect water quality and quantity. This can lead to unexpected outbreaks of water-borne diseases, increased harmful algal blooms and the creation of environmental niches for previously unknown vectors.

The incidence of infectious diseases caused by poor-quality drinking water is often highest in children aged 6-11 months. These aspects of implementing the Protocol contribute to achieving the two Millennium Development Goals of (1) halving by 2015 the proportion of the population not having access to improved water supply and adequate sanitation, and (2) reducing child mortality in the under-5 population by two thirds.

In the European region, the efforts by the Parties towards the implementation of the Protocol's provisions are supported jointly by the UNECE and the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

More information on the Protocol is available on the UNECE website (http://www.unece.org/env/water/text/text_protocol.htm) and on the WHO Regional Office for Europe website (<http://www.euro.who.int/watsan>).