

Protocol on Water and Health

Public participation for transparent and fair decisions

The Protocol on Water and Health recognizes that access to information and public participation are essential. It builds public awareness of issues related to water and health.

The Protocol specifically commits its Parties to “make appropriate practical and/or other provisions for public participation, within a transparent and fair framework, and [to] ensure that due account is taken of the outcome of the public participation” while setting targets and target dates to ensure a high level of protection against water-related disease, when developing water-management plans and when reviewing and assessing progress. In addition, Parties are advised to engage the public in the preparation of national summary reports under the Protocol.

The *Guide to Public Participation under the Protocol on Water and Health* is designed to support public authorities in exercising their obligations to ensure public participation in implementing the Protocol. It also provides the members of the public with the means and the knowledge to exercise their rights and obligations. The *Guide* is based on experience and good practices in the pan-European region. It is a tool to help improve the planning and carrying out of the public-participation process.



PUBLIC PARTICIPATION UNDER THE PROTOCOL: A CHALLENGING BUT REWARDING PROCESS

Public participation can be hard to achieve due to a lack of awareness among the public of its rights and among the public authorities of their obligations, as well as the lack of national legal frameworks and cross-sectoral cooperation. There may also be political reluctance to engage the public, lack of access to information and budgetary constraints to running public-participation processes.

However, public participation gives the public the opportunity to express its concerns. It also enables public authorities to take due account of such concerns, which is vital to enhance the quality and the implementation of the decisions adopted to improve access to drinking water and sanitation and to protect human health.

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: PUBLIC'S INPUT INFLUENCING THE TARGET-SETTING PROCESS

In parallel to the meetings of the official working group working on target setting in the Republic of Moldova, three local hearings were held with NGOs and other stakeholders in different parts of the country (central, north and south). Approximately 120 participants attended, including scientists, teachers, physicians, individuals and the media. The agenda was set according to the respective local situation and related problems. In the follow-up, comments submitted orally or by e-mail were collected and fed into the target-setting process.



REQUIREMENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Specific arrangements are needed to guarantee effective participation of the public, which include:

- Establishing stable and enabling national legal, administrative and economic frameworks;
- Raising awareness of water, environmental and health issues and of the Protocol and its participatory approach;
- Identifying a broad group of stakeholders dealing with the environment, water resources and health issues;
- Setting up a balanced coordination mechanism;
- Taking into account provisions such as costs, time and human resources for the design and running of the public participation procedure.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PROTOCOL'S IMPLEMENTATION

The first step in setting targets — analysing the country situation to identify the priority issues — must be open to the public. The authorities have the obligation not only to notify the public about the process, but also to inform them about how to participate. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play an important role in transferring information at this stage.



Questions of how and when to make information available — at no charge for inspection and in a barrier-free environment — are decisive for a successful outcome of the process.



Time frames should be set in a flexible way, as the nature and complexity of the issue might influence the time required for the process.



All views and outcomes of the process must be evaluated carefully and reflected in a transparent and traceable way in the final decision.

Various tools can be used to help ensure public participation, whether to identify stakeholders, to notify, inform or consult them, or to ensure that their comments and opinions are taken into due account.



THE COMPLIANCE COMMITTEE AND THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC

The compliance mechanism under the Protocol — the Compliance Committee — provides the possibility for any member of the public or group of people to submit communications to it about cases of alleged non-compliance with the Protocol.

UKRAINE: THE CIVIL SOCIETY, INTEGRAL PART OF THE COORDINATION MECHANISM

An Inter-agency Working Group was established in Ukraine to implement the Protocol, consisting of representatives of ministries and State committees, NGOs, research organizations and river basin management authorities. NGOs have equal standing with the other members of the Working Group. They participate in the discussions, express their views and have the right to vote within this body.

More information at: www.unece.org/env/water

Guide to Public Participation under the Protocol on Water and Health
available at: www.unece.org/index.php?id=34075

