



UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION AND USE OF TRANSBOUNDARY WATERCOURSES AND INTERNATIONAL LAKES

The Water Convention

...at your service

Water is destined to be the critical resource of our century, and perhaps the millennium. In Europe and Asia, as in much of the world, the demand for clean water will continue to increase while the supply dwindles. The first impacts are already seen in areas such as the Mediterranean and Central Asia, where water resources are stressed by overuse, pollution and drought. But ironically, as the world gets warmer and drier, some areas of the planet are experiencing more frequent and damaging floods than ever before.

The economic and social costs of water mismanagement and water-related disasters are soaring in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region, from North America to Europe and the Mediterranean to Central Asia. Cooperation across borders – between countries which share rivers, lakes and groundwaters – is essential for successful water management. The alternative is chaos and conflict.

The countries of the UNECE have taken unprecedented steps to ensure that their common waters are used reasonably and equitably by adopting the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. This landmark agreement, also known as the Water Convention, was adopted in Helsinki in 1992 shortly before the Rio Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development (the Earth Summit). The Convention entered into force in 1996, and as of 2009 has 36 Parties.

The Water Convention

The Water Convention's central aim is to strengthen local, national and regional measures within the UNECE region to protect and ensure the quantity, quality and sustainable use of transboundary water resources.

The Convention takes a holistic approach based on the understanding that water resources play an integral part in ecosystems as well as in human societies and economies.

Its commitment to integrated water resources management replaces an earlier focus on localized sources of pollution and management of separate components of the ecosystem.

The Convention requires countries to fulfil certain obligations, from the general to the practical. These include:

- ▶ To prevent, control and reduce adverse transboundary impacts on the environment, human health and socio-economic conditions
- ▶ To manage shared waters in a reasonable and equitable manner using the ecosystem approach and guided by the precautionary principle and the polluter-pays principle
- ▶ To preserve and restore ecosystems
- ▶ To carry out environmental impact assessments, to draw up contingency plans, set water-quality objectives and minimize the risk of accidental water pollution

The Convention requires Parties to enter into specific bilateral or multilateral agreements and to create institutions – joint bodies such as river and lake commissions – to meet these responsibilities.

More than 150 major rivers and 50 large lakes in the UNECE region run along or straddle the border between two or more countries.

Over 170 transboundary aquifers have been identified in the region and more are expected to be identified.

Twenty European countries depend on neighbouring countries for more than 10 per cent of their water resources. Five draw 75 per cent of their resources from countries upstream.

Nearly one third of Europe's 730 million people live in countries already suffering from high levels of water stress.

In the UNECE region (56 countries), an estimated 120 million people do not have access to safe drinking water.



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Keys to success

The Water Convention provides a sound **legal framework** for cooperation on shared water resources in the UNECE region.

It delivers **authoritative expertise and advice** on strategic and technical issues, and provides countries with guidance on such matters as drafting new agreements, modifying existing ones, establishing joint bodies, dam safety, flood management, and pollution prevention and response.

It **monitors and overviews implementation**, and continuously **evolves**, nurtured by the work of its Parties and its secretariat, to address old and new problems of transboundary water management.

It integrates **new concepts and ideas** into its work, such as adaptation to climate change in the transboundary context and payments for ecosystem services.

It offers **assistance** through projects, workshops, seminars, capacity-building exercises, information exchange and joint action.

It contributes to **conflict prevention, security and cooperation**.

The Water Convention is a living agreement that has generated two protocols – on water and health and on civil liability – and served as the basis for most agreements on transboundary waters in the region.

Water without borders

Nurturing cooperation

The Water Convention has served as a model for transboundary cooperation arrangements throughout the UNECE region. One early example was the Danube River Protection Convention (1994), which applies the Convention's provisions in a specific subregional context. Other examples are agreements on Lake Peipsi and on the rivers Sava, Bug, Meuse, Rhine and Scheldt. A particularly fruitful collaboration is developing among the five countries bordering the Tisza River (Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine). The Convention also played an important role after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia and the emergence of new countries, and has been the reference for new agreements on waters which were previously managed as national ones.

The Water Convention has also inspired the principles and approaches of the EU Water Framework Directive.

The Water Convention has influenced the work of many joint bodies and prompted the establishment of several new ones. Examples include the commissions for the rivers Elbe, Danube, Meuse, Oder and Scheldt, and for lakes Geneva, Ohrid, and Peipsi.



Guiding implementation

Both Parties and non-Parties can request assistance to ratify and implement the Convention. This service is particularly important for countries with economies in transition.

When Georgia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia decided to ratify the Convention, they asked the UNECE secretariat for help. They especially needed advice on how to address the legal, practical and economic aspects of implementation. The response was a practical guide on ratification and implementation of the Convention. The Guide explains the legal and technical aspects of the Convention, coupled with concrete examples of good practices, while offering general advice applicable to local situations. It is intended as a practical tool responding to country-specific needs.

Breakthrough in Central Asia

In Central Asia, the sharing of water resources between upstream and downstream countries, is particularly problematic, generating tension and insecurity. In a remarkable example of cooperation and supported by UNECE and other partners, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan inaugurated the Chu-Talas Commission in July 2006. UNECE will continue to help the countries broaden their cooperation and improve management of the rivers Chu and Talas. UNECE and its partners see this as a model demonstrating how the Water Convention can assist countries to overcome possible conflicts.

The Convention is even expanding its activity in Central Asia. Since 2009, UNECE participates in the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. This includes a number of projects aimed at supporting implementation of the Convention in the region.

Building capacity

Transboundary water management requires broad experience, competence and skills in many disciplines, from basic and applied sciences to management, negotiation, diplomacy and conflict resolution.

The UNECE Capacity for Water Cooperation (CWC) project is designed to improve the ability of experts and officials in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia to manage their transboundary waters and to create a network for exchange of experience between river basins and countries. It does this by organizing workshops on topics such as the operation of transboundary commissions, information management and public participation, implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health, and joint monitoring and assessment.

A UNECE project is developing a regional cooperative agreement for Central Asia on dam safety. The project is helping countries to revise and harmonize their national laws and also to arrange for the timely exchange of information and notification in case of dam-related accidents. It has already resulted in the development of legislation and institutions, which have improved safety in the subregion.



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Reducing industrial accidents

Industrial accidents can have impacts far from their site, polluting the air, soil and water. Parties to the Water Convention and to the Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents have decided to work together to prevent the accidental pollution of transboundary waters. A joint expert group set up by the two Conventions develops recommendations and concrete projects on ways to prevent chemical accidents and limit their impacts.

Assessing waters

The Water Convention obliges countries to jointly monitor and assess the state of their shared waters and the effectiveness of measures taken to address transboundary impacts.

Specific technical and strategic guidelines on monitoring and assessment of transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwaters were developed to translate this crucial obligation into practice. These guidelines were the basis for a number of pilot projects on shared river, lakes and groundwaters to jointly define information needs and design monitoring systems.

The first ever in-depth assessment of transboundary waters in the UNECE region was carried out under the Water Convention from 2003 to 2007, involving over 100 experts from the whole region. The assessment covers 140 transboundary rivers and 30 transboundary lakes in the European and Asian parts of the region, as well as 70 transboundary aquifers located in Central Asia, the Caucasus and South-Eastern Europe. A second assessment is under way to monitor progress achieved in implementation of policy, legal and institutional arrangements under the Convention.

Sharing information

Free, efficient and timely exchange of information is a key to building trust and a shared vision among neighbouring countries, particularly in cases of polluting accidents or infrastructure projects that could have effects downstream. The Central Asian Regional Water Information Base Project (CAREWIB) is improving the availability and exchange of information on water and environment in Central Asia, including through an Internet portal providing access to up-to-date information.

International Water Assessment Centre

The International Water Assessment Centre (IWAC) was established in 2000 to offer scientific and technical support to the Parties for the monitoring and assessment of transboundary waters. Based in Slovakia since 2008, it collaborates with Europe's leading water management institutions.



Adapting to climate change

Climate change is already affecting ecosystems in the UNECE region. Floods, droughts, water scarcity and fires are increasing in number and severity. Water supplies are being threatened and wildlife habitats altered or destroyed. While hopeful attempts to reverse climate trends are under way, adaptation may be the only practical recourse. However, very few countries have developed adaptation strategies, and those that exist are limited to the national level. There are essentially none for transboundary basins.

The *Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change* developed under the Water Convention includes ways to assess climate impacts, mitigate floods and droughts through integrated water resource management and appropriate transboundary cooperation, and adjust policies and strategies related to transboundary water management.

The Convention also works on transboundary flood management, for example on exchange of experience between EU and non-EU countries, and on the development of a sound legal basis in this field.



Fostering dialogue

Countries of the UNECE region can benefit from the Convention to improve the integrated management of their waters. Since 2006, “National Policy Dialogues” have been held to produce policy packages (e.g. new regulations) for this purpose, in line with the Convention, the EU Water Framework Directive and the Protocol on Water and Health.

Dialogues are carried out in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, each with specific objectives. In Ukraine, for example, the dialogue process aims at strengthening the capacity of water management authorities to cope with climate change and variability while maintaining safe drinking water supply and adequate sanitation.



Valuing ecosystems

Parties to the Water Convention acknowledged the importance and value of ecosystem services with their decision to promote the concept of payments for such services. Work began with the publication of the *Recommendations on Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) in Integrated Water Resources Management*, and was followed by assistance in these recommendations’ implementation through capacity-building and awareness-raising activities as well as pilot projects such as “Piloting ecosystem services payment in the Issyk-Kul Lake basin (Kyrgyzstan) and its replication in Central Asia”.





Expanding the Convention's influence

In 2003, the Water Convention was amended to allow accession by countries outside the UNECE region, thus inviting the rest of the world to use the Convention's legal framework and to benefit from its experience. Once the amendment enters into force, this will be of particular importance for countries that border the UNECE region, such as Afghanistan, China and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Convention secretariat is active in UN-Water, a mechanism to strengthen coordination and coherence within the United Nations system in the area of water, and particularly in its Task Force on Transboundary Waters.

The Convention also works closely with related conventions and organizations to combine their strengths and avoid duplication of efforts.

About UNECE

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), one of the five United Nations regional commissions, was set up in 1947. It provides a regional forum for governments from Europe, North America, Central Asia and Israel to study the economic, environmental and technological problems of the region and recommend courses of action.

The Water Convention is part of a larger environmental legal framework to address transboundary issues in the UNECE region, such as air pollution, environmental impact assessment, industrial accidents and environmental democracy.

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