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Protection of water resources: a prerequisite for access to safe water

The Human Right to Water and the Protocol on Water and Health: making access to water a reality

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The goals of access to water and sanitation have been manifested globally at a high political level, first in the Millennium Declaration and later at the Johannesburg Summit in 2002. CSD 13 gave further input into the implementation of these decisions. Important reasons why these decisions were taken is that access to safe water it is a fundamental element in poverty reduction and is also considered a basic human right. Access to water contributes also to other MDG goals, particularly as regards health, child mortality, equity, education and eradication of hunger. Those who benefit most from access to water and sanitation are the poor, and women and children.

Access to safe drinking water is not possible without adequate sanitation and other measures to reduce water pollution. The Protocol on Water and Health is therefore a fundamental instrument for making access to water and sanitation a reality. The Protocol is particularly useful for the EECCA (Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia) countries in their efforts to solve the problems related to water protection and water services.

The Protocol clearly manifests the responsibilities at different levels, and provides mechanisms for setting targets and monitoring the achievement of these targets. It is therefore important that all countries in the ECE urgently sign and ratify the Protocol. When developing mechanisms for the implementation of the Protocol the diverse situations in different parts of Europe should be taken into account.

The countries outside the ECE could also benefit from the Protocol, because the mechanisms of the Protocol can be used as examples of good practices.

In my mind, there are three major cornerstones that will make access to clean water a reality.

Firstly, water resources. In order to have access to safe water, the water resources must be of good quality and must meet certain standards to safeguard human health. The effective protection of water resources and their related ecosystems is therefore a necessity. According to the Protocol on Water and Health, the parties must establish national and/or local targets for a high level of protection against water-related disease. This means that countries need to be aware of the human activities which threaten water quality and that they have to plan measures to reduce the adverse effects. Let me mention

that in the European Union the Water Framework Directive provides an efficient instrument in the aims to achieve a good water quality state by 2015 and to prevent the deterioration of the state of water bodies. River basin management plans are the designated instruments for planning the necessary measures to achieve these objectives. Other crucial elements of this process are broad cooperation with stakeholders and hearings at three different stages where the public can participate in the planning process.

One priority issue in providing safe drinking water is sanitation, which includes wastewater treatment. In Europe more than 50% of urban wastewater is still untreated. In the European Union, the Urban Wastewater Directive sets the targets and standards for wastewater treatment, but the implementation of the directive needs further efforts in many countries. Water protection in rural areas is still a major challenge even in the European Union. In my own country, legislation was adopted in 2000 to reduce the discharges from rural households. The situation is much worse however in many EECCA countries because the establishment and rebuilding of the infrastructure for water supply and sanitation services will require major investments.

Integrated water resources' planning provides a useful tool for managing competing uses, taking also into account the ecosystem functions. Therefore, each country should draw up integrated water resource management plans, as agreed in Johannesburg Summit. The need for these plans is growing as a result of climate change, which is causing more frequent droughts and floods and which also has an influence in many ways on water quality.

Secondly, we need institutions in place to deal with problems. Water problems are often not caused by a lack of water resources but rather a lack of proper management and institutions. Responsibilities at all levels need to be clearly defined. Governments have to set targets, devise regulations and policies to control pollution of water resources and provide adequate resources for the work. Furthermore, it is important that governments establish mechanisms for assessing and monitoring water resources. Water issues are inter-sectoral. Therefore, mechanisms for cross-sectoral cooperation, covering also other sectors besides the health and water sectors, should be established.

Communities at the local level are often responsible for providing the infrastructure for water services. They must have the capacity, together with other stakeholders, for planning, building, maintaining, pricing and monitoring the infrastructure.

Capacity building is a key issue at all levels, and it includes the public and private sector, stakeholders, consumers, and NGOs. I believe that the exchange of experiences and good practices is a major challenge among the partners in the implementation of the Protocol.

One more point I would like to mention here. We should never forget that many water bodies are transboundary. Therefore, we need institutions in place to manage these waters. In Europe, too, there are still areas without institutions for managing transboundary water resources.

My third cornerstone for making access to clean water a reality is the question of financing. Water protection needs a lot of financing, but even much more will be needed if these measures are neglected. The deterioration of water resources raises costs, as rehabilitation is difficult and can often take a very long time to do properly. Health problems and other social impacts can have serious consequences and lead also to high costs. Again, those who suffer most are the poor, and women and children.

The national financing demands need to be integrated into national strategies and budgeting mechanisms. Local authorities and communities have to be empowered, have to have adequate resources and have to be capable of planning and managing water supply and sanitation services. The building and maintenance costs of the water supply and sanitation infrastructure must be covered. Additionally, targeted subsidies to cover the costs of providing basic services to those who cannot afford them should be in place.

International financing is also needed in many EECCA countries to provide the catalyst for meeting the targets and standards set forth in the Protocol on Water and Health. The ministerial conference "Environment for Europe", to be held in Belgrade in October 2007, will be an important milestone for evaluating the progress, gaps and measures to further the Protocol activities.