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**PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH****1 September 2023****Report of the sub-regional workshop  
Supporting accession to the UNECE-WHO/Europe  
Protocol on Water and Health  
Belgrade, 26-27 June 2023****Attendance (19 participants in person, 11 online (22 female participants)):***Government representatives:*

- *Kazakhstan:* Ministry of Health, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Republican State Enterprise “Scientific and Practical Center for Sanitary and Epidemiological Expertise and Monitoring” on the right of economic management “National Center for Public Health” of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources;
- *Uzbekistan:* Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Health, Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health Service;
- *Serbia:* Ministry of Health, Institute of Public Health, Ministry of Environmental Protection, Regional Economic Development Agency for Sumadija and Pomoravlje (REDASP).

*Organizations:* UN office in Serbia, WHO/Europe, WHO Country Office in Serbia*Other stakeholders:* International Water Assessment Center (IWAC)

The meeting was serviced by UNECE and funded through the UNECE Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation.

**Background:**

The workshop on supporting accession to the Protocol on Water and Health was held in Belgrade on 26-27 June 2023. Its objective was to facilitate dialogue and knowledge-sharing between Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and Serbia regarding the provisions, benefits and technical work associated with the accession process to the Protocol. The event provided an opportunity to learn from the experiences of Serbia, as a Party actively involved in the Protocol activities. The organization of technical workshop targeting a reduced number of country representatives actively involved in the Protocol activities at national level provided an opportunity for an open discussion with representatives of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on the status of their accession, their national priorities and challenges, and possible ways to facilitate the process.

## **Workshop proceedings:**

The workshop was chaired by Ms. Dragana Jovanovic, Institute of Public Health of Serbia, Ministry of Health, and Ms. Sarangoo Radnaaragchaa, UNECE Regional Adviser on Environment.

The opening remarks were made by the two representatives of Serbia, Ms. Jelena Jankovic, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Health, and Ms. Verica Jovanovic, Acting Director, Institute of Public Health, as well as by Ms. Françoise Jacob, UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia, Ms. Sarangoo Radnaaragchaa, Regional Adviser on Environment, UNECE, and Mr. Fabio Scano, WHO Representative in Serbia.

Ms. Nataliya Nikiforova, Environmental Affairs Officer responsible for managing the Protocol on Water and Health at UNECE introduced the objectives and agenda of the workshop.

Subsequently, the following presentations were delivered:

### ***Joint UNECE-WHO/Europe secretariat of the Protocol on Water and Health:***

Ms. Nataliya Nikiforova, manager of the Protocol on Water and Health, introduced key legal provisions of the Protocol, its main obligations of setting targets and reporting on progress, and the benefits of accession for Central Asian countries. Participants were also informed about the main decisions of the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (16-18 November 2022) and the outcomes of and Protocol-related commitments made at the UN 2023 Water Conference (New York, 22-24 March 2023).

Subsequently, Ms. Enkhtsetseg Shinee, Technical officer at WHO/Europe, introduced the work planned for 2023-2025 under the programme areas on surveillance and outbreak management of water-related diseases, surveillance of drinking-water and wastewater, water, sanitation and hygiene in institutions and public places, small water supply and sanitation systems and safe management of water supply and sanitation. Ms. Nikiforova then presented future work and existing tools in the area of increasing resilience to climate change and equitable access to water and sanitation. Ongoing and future projects under the Protocol were also presented. The project “Equitable access to water and sanitation services for all and in all settings and strengthened climate-resilience in the water and sanitation sector” planned under the Protocol for the period of 2023-2026 was presented to the workshop participants, highlighting that Kazakhstan was one of the project beneficiaries with activities planned for 2024.

### ***Kazakhstan:***

Mr. Nurzhan Kissabekov, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Control of the Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan, introduced the responsibilities within the ministry on accession and future implementation of the Protocol and presented updates on the situation and progress with water, sanitation, hygiene and health. Mr. Kissabekov highlighted that several national projects are being implemented to ensure access to clean drinking water. The goal is to ensure 100% provision of the country's population with high-quality drinking water by 2025. The latest data on water access and quality was presented, showing the progress achieved in 2018-2022. The representative then presented the following key challenges and needs of the country related to the water and health sectors:

- aging infrastructure, institutional and financial constraints and lack of human resources limit the access of rural population to basic water and sanitation services;
- existing facilities are poorly maintained and do not provide the required services;
- there is a need to develop respective local organizations to implement subprojects, manage the operations and maintain the constructed systems;

- the need to develop a unified database of water resources status and its management, including data on scientific support and human resources;
- measures are needed to reduce the impact of medical waste and wastewater on the environment and to ensure the effectiveness of infection prevention and control programmes.

Mr. Kissabekov also listed priority areas of the country, e.g. equitable access to drinking water in necessary quantity and quality, environmental pollution (incl. surface and ground waters), public health and health system, sanitary and epidemiological requirements on water, hygiene standards, Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy, SDGs.

As for accession status, Mr. Kissabekov stated that the process, delayed due to clarification requests in the context of interministerial consultation, is expected to be completed by 31 December 2024 at the latest. At the time of the event, the accession documents were submitted for consultation to the Ministry of Justice.

#### ***Uzbekistan:***

Ms. Olga Mirshina, Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health Service, Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan, briefed the meeting on the following:

- Key challenges and needs of the country:
  - continuous increase in water consumption, including for drinking, domestic and agricultural needs.
  - 30.3% of the population, mostly rural, relies on alternative water sources, such as water wells, bottled water, rainwater, etc., and 0.1% of the population depends on imported water.
  - low coverage of centralized sewerage systems, e.g. the majority of the rural population still uses cesspools.
- Priorities of the country: improvement of the situation in the field of providing the population with clean drinking water and adequate sanitation systems, reconstruction of water supply networks.
- Accession status: the accession process is being carried out in accordance with the national legislation. At the time of the workshop, the accession package was under review of the Ministry of Justice. Ministry of Health, as the leading institution, expected to successfully finalize the accession process in the coming months.

#### ***Tajikistan:***

Representatives of Tajikistan were not able to attend the meeting in person nor to connect online (due to internet connection issues) but had shared a presentation on the status of application of Protocol provisions in the country that was delivered by Ms. Nikiforova from the UNECE secretariat.

#### ***Serbia:***

Ms. Dragana Jovanovic, Institute of Public Health under the Ministry of Health, showcased Serbian achievements under the Protocol, starting from the ratification process, setting national targets, reporting, and continuing with the latest projects on applying Protocol methodologies and tools in addressing priority WASH issues in the country (e.g. in the area of equitable access to water and sanitation, application of integrated water and sanitation safety plans in small systems, WASH in schools and healthcare facilities, etc.) During the presentation Ms.

Jovanovic shared the challenges faced during the Serbian accession process, as well as the ways how the country managed to address them effectively.

Ms. Jelena Despotović, REDASP, provided technical details on the below-mentioned projects implemented under the Protocol:

- The Situation Analysis of the Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation for Primary School Children in the Šumadija and Pomoravlje Rural Regions;
- The baseline analysis of the situation of equitable access to water and sanitation in the regions of Sumadija and Pomoravlje, Serbia.

### ***Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation***

Ms. Sarangoo Radnaaragchaa then presented projects and activities supported by the RPTC, encouraging Central Asian states to implement UNECE international legal instruments, norms, standards and regulations and to cooperate on the regional level on addressing common challenges and solutions. The presentation of Ms. Radnaaragchaa led to opening the discussion on what type of support countries would need to accelerate the accession process to the Protocol on Water and Health.

### **Discussions:**

During the interactive session, workshop participants raised questions on the information presented during the workshop and discussed opportunities for further cooperation with the Protocol Secretariat which could help in boosting the Protocol accession process. The session moderated by Ms. Radnaaragchaa and Ms. Nikiforova, provided the following outcomes:

#### *Kazakhstan:*

- If needed, the country will request the secretariat to provide an official letter clarifying Protocol matters (financial implications, benefits, etc.) to be used as supporting material when submitting accession documents to the Ministries/Parliament;
- Once becoming a Party, the country may require technical assistance in implementing the Protocol obligations while addressing priorities of Kazakhstan in the field of water, sanitation, hygiene and health;
- Interested in studying the experience of applying the European Water Directive by Protocol Parties.

#### *Uzbekistan:*

- Asked about the possibility of organizing an in-country workshop to support the process of accession and implementing obligations under the Protocol targeting high-level decision-makers in water and health areas;
- May need support in reviewing national standards of drinking water quality and wastewater reuse;
- Interested in using Serbian experience in Protocol implementation, taking into account national specificities.

Both countries expressed their interested in cooperation with neighboring countries and with international organizations through joint regional projects. To strengthen the cooperation under the Protocol the participants suggested to review definitions for post-Soviet states in the areas of water, sanitation, hygiene and health.

During discussion the representatives of Serbia replied to the questions of the Central Asian representatives based on their work experience under the Protocol on the following topics:

- Serbia has no financial obligations under the Protocol. The contribution could be made on a voluntary basis in a financial or in-kind format (staff time, event/meeting hosting, providing a meeting venue, etc.). In the case of Serbia, the Ministry of Environmental Protection provides a yearly voluntary financial contribution, and the Ministry of Health provides an in-kind contribution;
- Protocol provides a strong framework and platform for promoting WASH activities at national level.
- Parties also join an international community and can benefit of expertise, knowledge and peer to peer support;;
- Protocol targets are aligned with EU legislation and national policies. Therefore, implementation of targets set under the Protocol does not represent an additional burden, including financially;
- One of the key benefits of target setting under the Protocol in Serbia is compiling the different intersectoral objectives as a set of national priorities in the area of water, sanitation and hygiene and using it as a basis for communication with national and local authorities as well as the donor community.

### **Recommendations and next steps:**

The workshop concluded with setting the following **recommendations and next steps** with regard to accession to the Protocol and other relevant work:

- Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will pursue the respective formal processes of accession to the Protocol;
- The joint secretariat will regularly follow up with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on the status of accession processes and reply to any additional questions, if needed;
- UNECE will also follow up with Kazakhstan on the upcoming equitable access self-assessment to be carried out under the UNDA project;
- The joint secretariat of UNECE and WHO/Europe will continue providing technical support to Central Asian states in their work on improving water, sanitation, hygiene and health sectors on national and regional levels;

### **Site visit to Makis water treatment unit:**

On 27 June 2023, the participants of the workshop visited the Belgrade water treatment unit, “Makis”. The site visit was organized by the Institute of Public Health of Serbia. The plant, which supplies clean drinking water to the growing population of Belgrade, is designed to process and treat raw water from the Sava River. Participants from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan exchanged views with Serbian authorities on the procedures for water treatment, monitoring water quality through regular sampling and analysis, and witnessed the 5 main treatment stages used at the plant, i.e. coagulation, flocculation, sedimentation, filtration and disinfection.