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INTERGOVERNMENTAL PREPARATORY MEETING  
NEW YORK, 28 FEBRUARY 2005 (10.00-13.00)

Chair's summary, ECE Commission Session,  
23 February 2005

*Water, sanitation and human settlements in the UNECE region: challenges and policy options*

The Commission examined major policy options for water, sanitation and human settlements in the UNECE region taking into account the outcome of the Regional Implementation Meeting in January 2004, the conclusions of the twelfth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in April 2004 and the challenges identified by the Parties to the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (UNECE Water Convention) and by the Committee on Human Settlements thereafter.

Although there were many specific regional concerns and approaches to improve water and sanitation, the Commission concluded that lessons learned in the European context might prove to be valuable for other regions in the world, taking into account similar proportions of people without access to safe water and sanitation in Europe and at the global scale. Pollution and overuse of rivers, lakes and groundwaters became also a concern for many developing countries, which share these waters with other riparian States in transboundary water basins, too.

The Commission stressed that despite the progress achieved, there was a need for action-oriented local and national measures as well as regional cooperation to speed up efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) commitments, particularly in countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and some South-East European (SEE) countries, which include five among the fifty poorest countries in the world.

The Commission took note of the Report by the Executive Secretary (E/ECE/1421) and agreed that the following action on water, sanitation and human settlements were of utmost priority to countries in the region, in particular the EECCA and SEE countries.

***Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)***

With more than 150 major transboundary rivers, over 100 transboundary groundwater aquifers and around 30 international lakes in the region, their reasonable and equitable use remains a major challenge, and interstate distribution of water has to be particularly addressed in EECCA and SEE countries with arid or semi-arid climate.

Priority should be given to the ratification of, and compliance with, the UNECE Water Convention and its Protocols as well as the bilateral and multilateral agreements. There is a need for drafting agreements and setting up of joint bodies where they do not yet exist, and the strengthening of existing international commissions. Capacity building on legal and regulatory instruments, joint institutions, monitoring and assessment, public participation in transboundary water management and planning of measures is a further necessity.

Integrated water resources management and planning is still to be promoted as a tool to: (a) integrate water supply and use with the management of waste and sewage; (b) ensure local income to fund operations, maintenance and more efficient use of water; (c) protect the water basin's ecosystems to protect water quality and maintain safe water supply; and (d) stipulate action in other sectors in order to prevent contamination and minimize climate change.

To prevent, control and reduce impacts on groundwaters due to pollution and overuse, priority should be given to the development and implementation of comprehensive groundwater protection policies that are not limited to water-production areas and that aim to preserve the quality of unpolluted aquifers. Restoration of aquifers, rather than abandonment of aquifers are additional requirements.

Greater emphasis should be given to the protection and sustainable use of water-related ecosystems, such as forests and wetlands, which capture, filter, store and release water. Thus, they are important suppliers of water and food and mitigate the effects of floods, droughts and other natural water-related hazards. Priorities of strategies, policies and actions should include awareness raising about their functions, dissemination of experience of solidarity between upstream and downstream communities; and good practice of protecting and sustainably using water-related ecosystems by means of innovative economic tools, such as payments for environmental services through successful public-private partnerships and public-public partnerships.

A region-wide framework for flood prevention, protection and mitigation is also needed, as floods are an increasing problem in the entire region. Priority shall be accorded to the development of appropriate legal instruments as well capacity building for local and national authorities as well as joint bodies responsible for transboundary water cooperation;

Although most UNECE countries are well advanced in drawing up and implementing comprehensive plans for integrated water resources management, further action is needed to develop IWRM plans on the basis of the whole of a catchment area, whether transboundary or not, including its associated coastal waters, and across the whole of a groundwater aquifer. Linking social and economic development to the protection of ecosystems shall be an additional aim.

### ***Water supply and sanitation***

More should be done to significantly lower the proportion of people who do not have access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation (an estimated 120 million people or 1 person in 7). Access to water and sanitation is a key element in the fight against poverty. Governments need to address these deficiencies and assume responsibility for setting up functioning regulatory and institutional frameworks, surveillance and response systems and other measures as stipulated in the Protocol on Water and Health.

Governments should ratify the UNECE/WHO Protocol on Water and Health and the UNECE Protocol on Civil Liability; update and effectively enforce health standards and legal and regulatory frameworks, with meaningful disincentives and fines for violations and discharges. There is a need for policy action to improve public and private sector participation in planning and decision-making, including the formation of user groups as well as to raise awareness of hygienic behaviour and potential health risks to encourage households to invest in improved sanitation and water supply.

Water supply and sanitation is closely related to integrated water resources management and should not only rely on technical measures. Up-scaling delivery of water-supply services in urban and rural areas, in line with applicable WHO, EU and UNECE provisions, is a major challenge in EECCA and SEE. Actions include the completion of the reforms of the water sector; effective enforcement of laws by means of increasing regulatory capacity; decentralisation of responsibilities and decision-making to the local level; and the creation of more favourable conditions to encourage private sector investment to improve service delivery and resource management, complemented by strengthened local and corporate governance;

In the preparation of water efficiency plans, more attention should be given to the inclusion of targets for action on water and sanitation at local, national and transboundary levels. New and/or revised water efficiency plans should take better account of different sectoral needs (water allocation both in the national and transboundary contexts) as well as the urban, peri-urban and rural inter-linkages. Increasing attention should be given to management technologies to conserve water in agriculture; this should include amending legislation to encourage the setting-up and capacity-building of irrigation user groups and the more widely introduction of agro-environmental programmes to minimise water pollution.

### ***Human settlements in the UNECE region: challenges and policy options***

For achieving sustainable human settlements, addressing the following challenges has repeatedly been identified as particularly important by countries of the ECE region: promoting a system of meaningful and democratic governance that responds to the needs of local communities; facilitating social cohesion and security; further implementing market-oriented reforms in the housing and urban sector; improving urban environmental performance; improving land and real estate markets and securing private land rights.

Meaningful and democratic governance, based on decentralization, partnership and inclusion, is the key to a sustainable housing sector. While decentralization has progressed in the UNECE region in recent years and local authorities have been made increasingly responsible for the planning and delivery of urban and housing services, a reduction in public spending has also occurred especially in countries in transition. In this situation, municipalities have increasingly turned to the private sector for assistance, often in the absence of a regulatory framework to monitor the effects of deregulated service delivery.

Governments need to address these deficiencies, and in particular need to:

- Assume responsibility for setting up functioning regulatory and institutional framework conditions in support of participatory local governance and public-private partnerships, in particular through capacity building within local governments and community-based institutions;
- Strengthen governance at all levels to ensure proper and efficient use of scarce resources. This entails ensuring that local governments dispose over sufficient resources and income-generating capacities;
- Improve the dialogue and understanding between the different levels of administration as well as among different government institutions to address local government issues;
- Empower civil society actors to ensure effective implementation of sustainable development policies.

In countries in transition mortgage lending takes place only to a very limited extent and the large scale-privatization of the housing sector in these countries did not result in the establishment of efficient private management and maintenance systems, in particular for multi-unit housing.

Governments should in particular:

- Provide favourable conditions for investment in the rehabilitation of the existing stock; and encourage tenant involvement in managing housing estates;
- Promote competition and increase efficiency in the provision of communal services by encouraging private sector involvement;
- Create an enabling institutional environment to attract domestic and foreign investment.

Reforms in the housing sector need to be accompanied by measures facilitating social cohesion and security. Poverty and the social exclusion of vulnerable population groups has become a significant social and political challenge throughout the region. The gap between income and housing prices has continued to increase, making housing less affordable. The provision of adequate and affordable housing therefore needs to be at the forefront of human settlements policies within the ECE region. The establishment of a concise social housing policy should be a key element not only of human settlements strategies but also an integral part of the overall social policies and the welfare system.

Governments in particular need to:

- Realize that social protection of vulnerable groups needs to be a priority aspect of public policy intervention and that social housing reforms become an integral part of the wider process of welfare state restructuring;
- Acknowledge that the significance of social housing reforms goes far beyond the provision of physical housing units and realize their importance for facilitating social cohesion and equity.

Social vulnerability in the housing sector is frequently caused by the absence of sound land administration and spatial planning systems. In countries in transition security of tenure is threatened due to malfunctioning land administration and property markets. Deficiencies in the land administration system hamper access to mortgage and impede solutions to the problem of illegal settlements.

Governments in particular should:

- Ensure secure entitlement to land, and freedom from unlawful eviction;
- Empower citizens to transform their assets into working capital by setting up formal systems for registry and titling of property and dwellings, which would help to increase access to finance;

Malfunctioning land administration systems, and the subsequent inadequate planning for and investment in public infrastructure, are also a major cause for unsustainable transport patterns, for scarcity of serviced urban land and, ultimately, for unsustainable urban environmental performance.

Governments need to:

- Recognize the importance of incorporating environmental concerns in the entire housing sphere including waste collection and sustainable energy consumption;