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Environment for Europe Bulletin

A Daily Report of the Seventh "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference

Published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)
in collaboration with UNECE

ONLINE AT [HTTP://WWW.IISD.CA/YMB/UNECE/EFE7/](http://www.iisd.ca/YMB/UNECE/EFE7/)
ISSUE #2, VOLUME 147, NUMBER 3, FRIDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER 2011



HIGHLIGHTS FOR THURSDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER 2011

On the second day of the Seventh Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" held in Astana, Kazakhstan, delegates convened in plenary sessions to hear keynote addresses on sustainable management of water and water-related ecosystems and sustainable management of water and greening the economy. Delegates then gathered in roundtables to discuss ecosystem valuation and payments for ecosystem services, lessons learned from transboundary basin cooperation, integrated water management, policy tools such as pricing and standards, and investments in water management.

SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF WATER AND WATER-RELATED ECOSYSTEMS

PLENARY SESSION: Session Chair László Borbély, Minister of Environment and Forests, Romania, opened the morning session by noting water management policy challenges and gaps. He focused on payments for ecosystem services as an important instrument for ensuring a good water environment for human health. He highlighted the Protocol on Water and Health and the European Environment and Health Ministerial Board, created in 2010, to attract high-level political interest on health impacts related to environmental policy.

Sándor Fazekas, Minister of Rural Development, Hungary, stressed the importance of high level attention to EU water policies and emphasized ecosystem approaches, climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, and the importance of international cooperation within and beyond the EU border. He emphasized that transboundary water challenges represent both a joint responsibility and a joint opportunity.

Nurgali Ashim, Minister of Environmental Protection, Kazakhstan, emphasized the tragedy of the Aral Sea and efforts to cope with it, including Central Asia legislation and strategies on sustainable development. He proposed the Green Bridge Partnership Programme as a mechanism to promote the transition from unsustainable policies to the green economy.

Gheorghe Șalaru, Minister of Environment, Republic of Moldova, highlighted his country's transboundary cooperation initiatives with Romania in the Prut and Danube river basins and with Ukraine in the Dniester river basin. He highlighted the policy dialogue as an important tool for sustainable water policies and recommended investments in water supply and sanitation.

Sascha Gabizon, Executive Director, Women in Europe for a Common Future, identified the three greatest regional water challenges as: poor management of transboundary water; leading to resources degradation as in the Aral Sea; deterioration of rural water supply and lack of access to safe drinking water, contributing to severe health problems especially in children; and water pollution from mining, with a risk of irreversible radioactive pollution of groundwater. She urged governments to ratify and implement the Protocol

on Water and Health, to allocate funds for water sanitation investments for small communities, and to fill the policy gap on mining pollution issues.

Letitia Obeng, Chair, the Global Water Partnership, stated that water should be an early focus for adaptation to climate change and integrating adaptation and water management plans will lead to better preparation and responses.

Saghit Ibatullin, Chairman, Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, described the challenges and progress made in saving the Aral Sea and introduced the Berlin Initiative, an international model in long-term solutions to water challenges. The Berlin Initiative includes three main components: regional cooperation; strengthening transboundary river basin management; and pilot projects.

Sibylle Vermont, Chair of the Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, Switzerland, stated that 19 countries and four organizations committed to 72 actions under the Astana Water Action. Most actions fall under integrated water resource management (IWRM) and are increasingly implemented through national strategies. She asked participants to ratify the amendment to make the UNECE Water Convention a global convention open to non-UNECE members. She recommended the inclusion of finance ministries as critical partners in future actions and commitments.

ROUNDTABLES: Delegates convened in three parallel roundtables to discuss sustainable water management related questions such as: policies that proved to be effective to value and protect water-related ecosystems, including payments for ecosystem services; policies that proved to be effective in addressing water related human health issues; priorities and challenges in adapting water management to extreme weather events and to climate change; and lessons learned from transboundary basin cooperation.

In Roundtable 1, moderated by Sibylle Vermont, Switzerland, delegates noted that ecosystem services are undervalued, stressed the need to incorporate ecosystem valuation in national economic accounts and highlighted payments for ecosystem services as a useful policy instrument. Several delegates emphasized transboundary cooperation as essential to sustainable water management, and acknowledged the role played by the UNECE Water Convention in providing the framework for such cooperation.

Delegates further stressed participatory local level water management, with some referring to the challenges faced by post-Soviet countries to move from highly centralised water management systems to more participatory ones. Some interventions emphasized synergies among international biodiversity related conventions and the UNECE Water Convention. Several delegates expressed appreciation for the Astana Water Action as an inspiring document that could create positive competition among countries.

The *Environment for Europe Bulletin* is a publication of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) <info@iisd.ca>, publishers of the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* © <enb@iisd.org>. This issue was written and edited by Catherine Benson, Suzi Malan, and Laura Russo. The Digital Editor is Francis Dejon. The Editor is Anju Sharma <anju@iisd.org>. The Director of IISD Reporting Services is Langston James "Kimo" Goree VI <kimo@iisd.org>. Funding for coverage of this meeting has been provided by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). IISD can be contacted at 161 Portage Avenue East, 6th Floor, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 0Y4, Canada; tel: +1-204-958-7700; fax: +1-204-958-7710. The opinions expressed in the *Bulletin* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IISD. Excerpts from the *Bulletin* may be used in other publications with appropriate academic citation. Electronic versions of the *Bulletin* are sent to e-mail distribution lists (in HTML and PDF format) and can be found on the Linkages WWW-server at <<http://www.iisd.ca/>>. For information on the *Bulletin*, including requests to provide reporting services, contact the Director of IISD Reporting Services at <kimo@iisd.org>, +1-646-536-7556 or 300 East 56th St., 11D, New York, New York 10022, United States of America. The IISD Team at the Seventh "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference can be contacted by e-mail at <laura@iisd.org>.

On water and health issues Jan Kubiš, Executive Secretary, UNECE, said the root causes of the problems lie, *inter alia*, in the policy environment, resource allocation, and country capacity. He noted that the main value of the Protocol on Water and Health is its requirement for a holistic view and setting of targets. He stressed the UNECE Water Convention's role as a conflict prevention instrument in Central Asia and other regions.

In Roundtable 2, moderated by Hugo Von Meijenfeldt, Deputy-Director General for the Environment, the Netherlands, delegates called for more multi-sectoral perspectives on water issues, including synergies among water, health, and climate change. Participants recognized the EU Water Framework Directive as a policy tool that takes into account water related ecosystem services and intends to achieve a balance between different water use and sectoral use. Countries underscored the need for implementation of existing regulations and international conventions, including the Protocol on Water and Health, while also emphasizing coordination and cooperation.

Roundtable 3 was moderated by Chyngyzbek Uzakbaev, Deputy Chairman, Committee of Water Resources and Melioration, Kyrgyzstan. Mladen Zirojević, Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressed their desire to become actively involved in the implementation of the EU water legislative framework. Most delegates agreed that while transboundary cooperation should be a major priority, it should be approached with patience and mutual respect between neighbouring countries. Participants identified other challenges, *inter alia*: development of harmonized legal frameworks across borders; improved water use through policy instruments such as taxation; improved water recycling practices; capacity building especially for water quality and quantity monitoring; and intensification of education and awareness campaigns.

SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF WATER AND GREENING THE ECONOMY

PLENARY SESSION: In his opening remarks to the afternoon plenary, session Chair Bruno Oberle, State Secretary, Director of the Federal Office for the Environment, Switzerland, cautioned participants about current levels of natural resources consumption. He stressed justice and participation as two key pillars in ensuring sustainable management of water for the green economy.

Ville Niinistö, Minister of Environment, Finland, highlighted, *inter alia*: investments in renewable resources, payments for ecosystem services, green technology, and education and training. He emphasized the importance of managing water resources to promote adaptation to climate change and dissemination of best practices.

Rinat Gizatulín, Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Russian Federation, presented the achievements of the Russian Federation on sustainable management of water resources and the green economy, including a 10% reduction in water use and a water payment system disaggregated by category of water user and water location.

Anna Golubovska-Onisimova, President, "MAMA-86," Ukraine, highlighted, *inter alia*: water accounting as a core part of economic planning; support to education and sustainable consumer choices; and implementation of IWRM and water conservation policies as crucial elements for the transition to the green economy.

Simon Upton, Director, Environment Directorate, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, stated that water scarcity can be a threat to economic development. He highlighted efficiency of water use, water pricing to reflect scarcity and provide incentives, water financing, and water allocation among competing uses.

Mykola Melenevskiy, President, International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, outlined the river basin management planning process. He stressed the importance of investments from the hydropower, navigation, and agricultural sectors in the water sector.

Tulegen Sarsembekov, Deputy Chief, Department of Technical Assistance, Eurasian Development Bank described the transboundary nature of Central Asia's rivers, stressing the importance of legal mechanisms for the joint use of water and transboundary rivers and to address ecological and social issues.

The keynote speakers from Finland, the Russian Federation and the Eurasian Development Bank supported the Green Bridge Partnership Programme.

ROUNDTABLES: After the afternoon plenary, delegates participated in three parallel roundtables to tackle: which policy mixes and practical tools, such as IWRM, pricing, standards and water users associations, can be most effective to improve water efficiency in agriculture, households and industrial operations; and encouraging investments to take into account impacts on water quantity and quality, energy and resource efficiency and vulnerable populations.

Roundtable 1 was moderated by Gheorghe Constantin, Chair, European Union Water Initiative Working Group for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Romania. Delegates debated social equality and access to water in relation to water pricing, noting that water prices are also determined by subsidies and not driven by environmental or sustainability objectives. One participant emphasized practical policy tools for adaptation to climate change, modernization, and public-private partnerships, while another described how a well-designed water pricing system can ensure quality, affordable water services. Participants highlighted environmental impact assessments and corporate social responsibility as important policy tools. Most delegates emphasized the importance of training, research and technology development.

Roundtable 2 was moderated by Zaal Lomtadze, Chair of the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy, Georgia. Some delegates described how strong laws and regulation can facilitate good water quality, contributing to low prices. In contrast, participants from economies in transition described the challenges of ensuring safe drinking water for their populations and the negative health impacts. Some delegates highlighted weak monitoring frameworks in post-Soviet countries and the lack of data for decision-making. Participants also emphasized the important role of business. A representative from Coca-Cola offered examples on how the private sector can partner with governments and communities to provide clean drinking water.

Roundtable 3 was moderated by Marek Gromiec, International Expert in Water Resources Management. Most delegates agreed that IWRM, pricing, standards and water user associations should be approached collaboratively among neighbouring countries to enhance effectiveness, with one delegate calling for accelerating IWRM into agriculture, hydropower generation, and industry. Many participants stressed the introduction of tariffs, while others noted that these should be affordable to less affluent sectors of society. Some delegates stressed banning the use of asbestos in the manufacture of water pipes and reducing fertilizer and pesticide use.

One participant called for the application of the land stewardship principle and for the removal of perverse subsidies. Delegates agreed that good governance, efficient legislation and wide cooperation should guide the process towards a green economy.