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Protocol on Water and Health MOP Bulletin

A Briefing Note of the Third session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP 3) to the Protocol on Water and Health to the UN Economic Commission of Europe (UNECE) Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention): Special Session on Equitable Access to Drinking Water and Sanitation

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A BRIEFING NOTE OF THE THIRD SESSION OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES (MOP 3) TO THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH: SPECIAL SESSION ON EQUITABLE ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION: 25 NOVEMBER 2013

The third session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP 3) to the Protocol on Water and Health to the UN Economic Commission of Europe (UNECE) Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) took place from 25-27 November 2013, in Oslo, Norway, organized by the UNECE and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe.

The meeting, which brought together representatives and observers from government, civil society, academia and international and regional organizations, addressed: the status of implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health; review of past activities and discussion of future activities in the different areas of work, including target setting and reporting, surveillance and early warning systems, project facilitation mechanism, compliance procedure, promotion of the Protocol and advocacy, public awareness, equitable access, and capacity building and sharing of experience; the Protocol and relevant global processes and initiatives; the Programme of Work for 2014-2016, terms of reference bodies established to implement it and resources needed for its implementation; partners in cooperation; and other business. The high-level segment included the Special Session on Equitable Access to Drinking Water and Sanitation, which took place on 25 November, the subject of this short briefing note.

REPORT OF THE SPECIAL SESSION

The Special Session on Equitable Access to Water and Sanitation convened on the theme "Fair and Smart Ways to Reach Universal Access." Moderator Harsha Ratnaweera, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, opened the session stressing the recognition by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) of water as a human right, while underscoring that in the pan-European region 19 million people lack access to safe drinking water and 67 million lack access to improved sanitation and highlighting disparities between high and low income countries, and urban and rural areas. He said the challenging financial environment calls for being smart and smarter in delivering access to water supply and sanitation.

In opening remarks, Benoit Vallet, General Director for Health, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, France, presenting on behalf of Marisol Touraine, Minister of Social Affairs and Health, France, said France has undertaken many activities since the first MOP to the Protocol on Water and Health, presenting specific efforts including: the housing solidarity fund; pilot studies on water poverty; and measures to provide isolated populations with access to water and sanitation.

He noted the role of integrated management, in part to address increasing conflicts among needs, stressing that regulations must prioritize uses.

Vallet welcomed the publication of the "Equitable Access Score-Card: Supporting Policy Processes to Achieve the Human Right to Water" guide, saying it translates the five key themes synthesized in the report "No One Left Behind: Good Practices to Ensure Equitable Access to Water and Sanitation in the Pan-European Region" into a framework governments and organizations can use to understand gaps in equitable access.

In a keynote speech, Graham Alabaster, UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), emphasized that an understanding of how the world is changing is critical to addressing issues related to access to water supply and sanitation, noting trends including global population growth, urbanization, and changing age structures, in addition to pressures caused by climate change and conflict. He highlighted that urbanization will occur in secondary urban settlements, where there is less capacity to provide basic urban services.

Alabaster underscored that information is frequently aggregated in ways that masks service gaps, saying information and data must be disaggregated to highlight inequities. He called for increasing community participation and addressing gaps in the poorest communities first, in particular low-income peri-urban and rural areas. He noted implications for the post-2015 development agenda, highlighting the need to effectively combine the streams of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), water resources management (WRM) and wastewater management and water quality (WWMWQ) into a holistic and universal goal.

In a keynote speech, Manuel Thurnhofer, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), addressed water and sanitation challenges in the perspective of the post-2015 development agenda. He presented a Swiss proposal for a sustainable development goal (SDG), "a water-secure world for all," building on the outcomes of the thematic consultations on water held under the post-2015 development agenda process. He highlighted the role of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on water supply and sanitation in catalyzing progress on this issue, while saying it failed to address wider water-related challenges and calling for ensuring the ambitions for post-2015 are different.

Thurnhofer said fighting inequality requires addressing the unfinished business of the MDGs in order to translate the human right to water and sanitation into reality. He emphasized a holistic approach saying targets on WASH cannot be achieved without equitable water resource targets, and that only sustainable and equitable water management can reconcile competing demands with priorities for basic needs, noting the importance of governance reforms together with investment in physical and natural infrastructure.

On the importance of international cooperation to secure equitable access to water globally, Carola Bjørklund, Ambassador to the Council of Europe Affairs, Ministry of

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Foreign Affairs, Norway, emphasized Europe is the only continent where progress on access to adequate sanitation is stagnating, saying this is unacceptable. She called for establishing cooperation between the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and countries needing financial assistance, and emphasized the important role that cooperation between the UNECE, WHO and EBRD plays in ensuring the affordability of water access.

Chyngysbek Uzakbaev, Minister of Agriculture and Melioration, Kyrgyzstan, noted their dedication to the provisions of the Protocol. He said they recognize the importance of addressing issues related to access to water and sanitation and have undertaken the process of developing targets and indicators under the Protocol. He welcomed the chance to take part in international dialogues on these issues.

Ermina Salkičević-Dizdarević, Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Bosnia and Herzegovina, noted that the large number of signatories reflects the importance of access to water and sanitation. Saying water is a key aspect of human existence, she said while Bosnia and Herzegovina is rich in water resources, it is not limitless and requires conservation and protection. Stressing possible accession to the EU, she noted their main focus is implementation of the European Water Framework Directive (WFD), noting this will move them towards achieving the objectives of the Protocol as well.

On challenges and success stories as a way forward, Svetlana Cotelea, Deputy Minister of Health, Moldova, noted their progressive strengthening of national capacity to provide water and sanitation, giving attention to equity and access for the most vulnerable. She highlighted geographic and social inequalities, noting a focused approach to implementation is reflected in the targets and indicators developed under the Protocol. She highlighted progress on improving access to adequate water supplies in rural areas and addressing access to water supply and sanitation in schools. She said work under the Protocol set an operational platform for cooperation across sectors, in particular health.

Milan Simurđić, Ambassador to Norway, Serbia, noted that Serbia is devoted to responding to the obligation to publish targets and data under the Protocol. He highlighted their strong willingness to cooperate with other Parties to eliminate disparities in access to water and sanitation.

On successful participatory approaches for sustainability and relevance, Ionut-Ciprian Iuga, State Secretary, Department for Waters, Forests and Fisheries, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, Romania, emphasized the importance of stakeholder involvement in Protocol implementation, highlighting the publication of the “Guide to Public Participation under the Protocol to the Convention.” He stressed the Guide provides Parties with a tool to increase and improve public participation, outlining elements in Romanian national law which promote participation in decision-making processes related to water supply and sanitation.

Alabaster reflected on the statements, highlighting points on finance, information sharing, planning and stakeholder engagement, noting the need for: innovative involvement of development banks in increasing service coverage levels; increased exchange of experiences and best practices; future-oriented planning even in countries with “limitless resources”; and engagement of local authorities and stakeholders in Protocol implementation.

Thurnhofer emphasized that the MDGs were an impressive means to mobilize additional resources from countries, the international community, the private sector and civil society,

saying the need is to make sure the priorities are right. He noted that the MDGs developed aligned and shared objectives, which partially overcame the challenge of limited budgets. He said priority setting is critical in tackling the challenges ahead, emphasizing the Protocol is a key element in prioritizing WASH outside the water community.

A panel then discussed: how to introduce the human rights dimension into policy processes; how to create smart targets to ensure universal access, outcomes of the Budapest Water Summit; how to progress towards equitable access through projects on the ground; and the practical implications of achieving universal access for service providers and regulators.

On the status of equitable access in Portugal and main challenges, Paulo Lemos, Secretary of State for Environment, Portugal, supported the definition of water access and sanitation as a human right and the development of a water-specific SDG under the post-2015 development agenda process. He highlighted the evolution and achievements of water policy in Portugal to control waterborne communicable diseases from 1980 to 2012. He noted the challenge of maintaining the sustainability of systems to provide water and sanitation services.

On the outcomes of the Budapest Water Summit, Zsuzsanna Steindl-Kerekes, Ministry of Rural Development, Hungary, highlighted that the Declaration called for both a water-specific SDG under the post-2015 development agenda process and establishment of an intergovernmental process to assess the implementation of future goals. She described a special session on striving towards universal access to water and sanitation, saying it noted the importance of access to water and sanitation for households, schools, health centers and refugee camps.

Presenting a statement on behalf of all NGOs present, Anna Tsvietkova, NGO EcoForum and MAMA-86, Ukraine, said the Protocol provides a sound framework for progressively achieving universal access to water supply and sanitation. She identified challenges including lack of reliable data on access of the vulnerable to safe water and sanitation, the degradation of water supply and sanitation infrastructure, that geographic disparities remain a common problem, the continued outbreak of intestinal infections in a number of countries, and that children are among the most vulnerable in the region and frequently lack access to safe water at schools and home. She underscored the health and social risks of water privatization. She called on Parties to: prioritize access to safe water and sanitation in national actions and allocate adequate financial resources; incorporate rights-based targets into river basin management plans; and proclaim water rights issues a priority in river basin management plans.

Providing the practitioners perspective, Tom Williams, International Water Association (IWA), highlighted three challenges faced by practitioners in implementing the human right to water and sanitation. First, he identified a misconception in language, noting the need to develop a glossary of common language on the human right to water and sanitation. Second, he underscored the need to reconcile the long-term affordability for customers and full cost recovery. Third, he stressed that the capacity to collect and report on data must be expanded, saying the Protocol is a great platform to support monitoring frameworks.

In closing, Lemos said one remaining challenge is conserving the affordability of installed systems. He identified, *inter alia*: prioritizing investments in areas facing affordability issues; limiting or eliminating connection charges; and establishing social tariffs for households that struggle with cost. The special session concluded at 5:37pm.