

**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC  
COMMISSION FOR EUROPE****WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE**

Meeting of the Parties to  
the Protocol on Water and Health  
to the Convention on the Protection  
and Use of Transboundary  
Watercourses and International Lakes

Sixth session  
Geneva, 16–18 November 2022

**Item 2 of the provisional agenda**

High-level session: “The Protocol on Water and Health:  
Strengthening the resilience of WASH and health services in  
times of climate change and pandemics”

**Key messages and actions needed to strengthen WASH resilience to climate change and future  
pandemics,**

*as endorsed by the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and  
Health (Geneva, 16–18 November 2022)*

*Background*

The sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health took place in Geneva, on 16–18 November 2022. The meeting, attended by 300 participants representing the environment, water and health sectors, including deputy ministers and State secretaries from 45 countries of the pan-European region, as well as water and sanitation service providers, partner organizations and civil society, concluded its high-level session entitled “The Protocol on Water and Health: Strengthening the resilience of WASH and health services in times of climate change and pandemics” with a number of key messages and actions needed to strengthen resilience to climate change and future pandemics.

The Meeting of the Parties endorsed the following conclusions and entrusted its Chair (Hungary), with the support of the secretariat, to submit them to the United Nations 2023 Water Conference (New York, 22–24 March 2023) and the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, 5–7 July 2023).

**Key messages**

- **The Protocol on Water and Health is a powerful legally binding tool to progressively realize the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, increase resilience to climate change and prepare for future pandemics, while protecting human health, the environment and water resources.** The Protocol has been a key governance framework to support recovery processes towards a more resilient post-coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic world and has provided reliable approaches in this regard, such as its target setting mechanism. It is an effective pan-European intergovernmental platform for achieving the

Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the Ostrava commitments on environment and health, while “leaving no one behind”.

- **Safe water and adequate sanitation are prerequisites for human dignity, gender equality and inclusive development, as well as being essential to the provision of health care.** Progress has been made in the pan-European region in terms of widening access to water and sanitation and improving drinking water quality. The Protocol can help to accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal 6, including to ensure universal access to clean water and sanitation and to close the sanitation gap to meet target 6.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (ensure safe toilets for all by 2030).
- **A whole-of-government response with legislative measures and sufficient financing is needed to strengthen the response to the major challenges faced by humankind.** The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis have highlighted good examples of the use of scientific input by governments and other relevant authorities in evidence-informed decision-making and in the wider dissemination of relevant information to the public. A robust and well-established governance framework is an essential prerequisite for safe, sufficient and resilient provision of WASH services.
- **The pandemic highlighted the importance of WASH as a fundamental first-line response, whilst climate change is a threat multiplier, with water and sanitation services forming the backbone in terms of the resilience of communities and populations.** The pandemic response also reduced the incidence of other communicable diseases in the pan-European region, showing the importance and value of simple measures such as hand hygiene for infection prevention and control, which is fundamentally dependent on reliable supplies of water and the availability of soap. Significant efforts have been made to address gaps and ensure continuity of services, but further steps are still needed to prevent interruptions and ensure reliable service provision for all throughout the pan-European region.
- **Wastewater surveillance proved its effectiveness in public health surveillance and decision-making in pandemic response.** Wastewater surveillance goes beyond COVID-19, with unique potential for monitoring of antimicrobial resistance and substance abuse, as well as poliovirus detection triggering a public health response.
- **The climate change crisis and the pandemic show the importance of international cooperation in tackling public health and water management challenges as global concerns.** Partnerships continue to be critical in the fight against climate and public health threats. Strong, safe and resilient WASH services can help countries to address existing and emerging challenges, while also driving the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **Actions needed to strengthen resilience to climate change and future pandemics**

- **Climate change and pandemics disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalized groups,** including refugees, migrants and homeless persons. To make societies more resilient, governance frameworks need to address inequity and inequality. The Protocol tools support action in this regard.
- **Climate change adaptation is mainly about ensuring resilient water resources, as well as safeguarding water supply and sanitation systems.** The severest climate change impacts are caused by extreme water-related events, hence the need to strengthen environmental and community resilience to droughts and floods.
- **Response strategies addressing pandemic preparedness should go beyond the existing WASH and climate commitments.** Further work with partners can enhance the development of and transition to climate-resilient WASH services and systems, with strategies that are translated into climate resilience plans at the operator level.

- **Maintain momentum for hand hygiene as a first line of defence in preventing the spread of infectious diseases.** Scaling up provisions for hand hygiene in public places and institutions is a key ingredient in increasing community health and resilience.
- **Prevention and reduction of water-related diseases also need to be at the core of sustainable development,** such as strengthening international collaboration and technical expertise on legionella prevention and control – a major challenge across the pan-European region.
- **The voice of youth needs to be strengthened in decision-making on water, sanitation, hygiene and health.** An education strategy is needed to prepare and encourage the engagement of the younger generation in tackling long-term and intergenerational challenges.
- **Capitalize on the current momentum for action.** Crises can generate a window of opportunity, which, however, closes as the perception of risk reduces. This provides an opportunity to promote the importance of WASH in climate resilience and pandemic response. The Protocol provides a pan-European platform and globally available practical tools to support such action.
- **Enduring and effective action requires clear governance structures and long-term financing.** Action today will cost less than delayed action.