

ECE environmental instruments to respond to the COVID-19 crisis

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge that is leaving no country untouched. It is putting enormous pressure on health systems and environment. Above all, the pandemic is creating untold human suffering, as illness and income loss affects the life of many, tearing apart the fabric of our societies.

We need an emergency response to deal with the immediate consequences but, as the recently released Secretary General Report on Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 states, “while we deal with the crisis, we must use the opportunity to recover better and build sustainable societies”.

ECE’s environmental contribution to address this crisis and its consequences includes some instruments that are relevant in this emergency situation and many others that can be used to reduce risk and “build back better”.

Water Convention and Protocol on Water and Health

- The Water Convention helps to provide sufficient water for hygiene in the more than 60% of freshwater worldwide, which crosses national borders, since it obliges countries to prevent, control and reduce transboundary impacts and to use waters in a reasonable and equitable way. The Convention also includes provisions for early warning across borders, joint monitoring and assessment, mutual assistance etc.
- The workshop aims to raise the capacity of water professionals to prevent, prepare for and react to water-related and health-related disasters and climate change and to promote transboundary cooperation in this regard. It will bring together the water, health, climate change and disaster communities and discuss approaches such as water safety planning etc.
- New challenges for information exchange and monitoring of transboundary rivers may arise due COVID-19. Timely availability of water of adequate quantity and quality under all circumstances is even more important to ensure, requiring up-to-the-standards monitoring. Performant monitoring and effective information exchange helps to address emerging health concerns linked to water quality.
- NPDs on IWRM and WSS provide platforms for regular dialogue on water management, water and sanitation issues, hygiene and water-related diseases.
- Activities on the safety of hydrotechnical facilities (dam safety) under the Water Convention provide countries with the dialogue platform for regular cooperation. There are risks that COVID-19 crisis may impact on the state of water management infrastructure (dams, water intake facilities, wastewater treatment plants) which may receive less maintenance these days due to quarantine.
- Activities on climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in transboundary basins under the Water Convention. These activities can help to tackle the COVID-19 crises as they aim to address the projected variety in water resources quantity and quality; and to increase linkages between transboundary water cooperation and disasters. Many instruments developed in this regard by the Convention can be applied to COVID-19 response. Several guidance documents exist to help countries develop and implement adaptation strategies and cope with varying water availability, including most recent the Words into Action Guide on addressing water-related disasters and transboundary cooperation. The latter needs to be

promoted and translated. The experience of the global network of basins working on climate change as well as from the projects on the ground can provide a lot of insights. Climate change may aggravate the consequences of the COVID-19 crises and make adaptation in transboundary basins even more vital. Under the current conditions access, availability and quality of water remains vital to preventing and overcoming diseases incl. Covid-19. The Water Convention has been working for 15 years in transboundary basins to adapt to climate change. Capacity building activities on the global level and support provided to the Chu-Talas, the Dniester, the Danube, the Mekong, the Neman and the Niger in development and implementation of transboundary adaptation strategies and plans will ensure better resilience of the countries, basins and people (more than 300 m) with regards to access, availability and quality of water in transboundary perspective under changing climate.

- Support to countries in water-related elements of the COVID-response and recovery, by making available guidance material on hygiene, preventing water pollution, disaster risk prevention preparedness and response etc. This will include a webpage on the ECE website with existing guidance material, sending out a communication, article(s), organizing sessions at upcoming events, possibly webinars (exact activities to be discussed with partners, including WHO-Europe). The NPD steering committees in the countries may be used to discuss measures needed in the water sector and beyond to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, discuss recovery and prevent future similar outbreaks. Ministries of Health and sanitary and epidemiological services are active participants of the NPD SC meetings.
- The provision of safe water, sanitation and adequate hygiene is essential to protecting human health during all infectious disease outbreaks. Safe hygiene standards require a continuous and adequate supply of safe water, and sanitation systems that are operational even under stress or challenging conditions, such as under a changing climate.
- UNECE-WHO Regional Office for Europe Protocol on Water and Health is a legally-binding agreement for countries of the pan-European region that provides guidance and facilitates sharing of best practices supporting countries in setting national objectives in the areas of institutional WASH, safe management of sanitation, including in small scale supplies, and increasing resilience of water and sanitation infrastructure to climate change
- The Protocol has also developed concrete tools to promote government uptake in policy and practice of best handwashing practices in institutional settings (schools, hospitals and workplaces) in order to slow down the transmission of the current pandemic of COVID-19 and prevent possible future spread of this and other infectious diseases, ensuring that no one is left behind

Disaster risk management / Industrial Accidents Convention

- UNECE risk management guidance and best practice support regulatory authorities to manage the risks that confront consumers, citizens and communities. The general recommendation on the use of risk management tools in regulatory systems is “Managing Risk in Regulatory Frameworks”. More specific recommendations are contained in “Crisis Management within a Regulatory Framework”
- The Industrial Accidents Convention has 41 Parties (covering most Western Europe, all SEE, Eastern Europe apart from Ukraine, Caucasus, apart from Georgia and Kazakhstan in CA.) In addition, beneficiaries of the Convention's Assistance and Cooperation Programme in EECCA and SEE have committed to its implementation. Convention as a model can help develop approaches (Guidelines, Protocols, legislation, strategies/policies and measures) to future

preparedness, response and mutual cross-border assistance in case of emergencies (while focused itself on chemical accidents). It has a strong focus on transboundary cooperation which could inspire the application of existing instruments, relevant guidelines, or the development of new ones. The Convention is a legal instrument for disaster risk management and reduction under the Sendai Framework.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

- Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment
- It ensures that environmental and health considerations are taken into account in the planning of economic and regional development activities, including through obligatory consultation of environmental and health authorities, and the public. It provides decision-makers early warning of unsustainable options and contributes to the reduction and management of health risks, considering effects that are direct and indirect, secondary, cumulative, synergistic, short-, medium- and long-term, permanent and temporary, positive and negative. It also allows for a cohesive, integrated (national scale) approach that goes beyond the limits of the individual economic sectors. The Protocol contributes to building healthier, more sustainable and more resilient societies, including against future outbreaks of viruses. Moreover, in principle, the countries could choose to consider health risks and mitigation measures for pandemics as part of their planning processes.

Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and its protocols

- Poor air quality is recognized as the single largest environmental health risk estimated to cause approximately 600,000 premature deaths in the region. A substantive drop in air pollution levels has been reported due to the current COVID-19 crisis. This sheds light on the massive environmental impact of our everyday habits and economic activities. Once the crisis is over, air pollution levels will start rising again unless the required long-term measures are taken, such as those contained in the Convention's Protocols. The amended Gothenburg Protocol, which is currently being reviewed by its Parties, contains specific targets for different pollutants harmful to human health and the environment, including nitrogen oxides and particulate matter. A number of guidance documents for reducing emissions from different sectors are also available or being developed under the Convention.

Aarhus Convention

- Ensure effective public participation in decision-making regarding COVID-19: (a) in relation to specific activities listed in Annex I of the Aarhus Convention, as appropriate, and in relation to activities which may have a significant effect on the environment, including genetically modified organisms; (b) during the preparation of plans and programmes relating to the environment; (c) during the preparation by public authorities of executive regulations and other generally applicable legally binding rules that may have a significant effect on the environment. Further, persons shall be provided opportunity to exercise their rights without discrimination as to citizenship, nationality or domicile and, in the case of a legal person, without discrimination as to where it has its registered seat or an effective centre of its activities.

Aarhus Convention -Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers Protocol

- Enhance public access to information through a coherent, integrated, nationwide pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs), which could facilitate public participation in environmental decision-making as well as contribute to the prevention and reduction of pollution of the environment. Each Party shall take the necessary measures to require that employees of a facility and members of the public who report a violation by a facility of national laws implementing this Protocol to public authorities are not penalized, persecuted or harassed by that facility or public authorities for their actions in reporting the violation.

Committee on Environmental Policy

- The UNECE Executive Committee invited "relevant subsidiary bodies of the Commission to discuss how to reflect a COVID-19 response that supports further progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in their Programmes of Work and requests the secretariat to present an overview of these recommendations to EXCOM for consideration."
- The CEP-26 discussed the agenda Item 13 "Impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic, including on the Environment for Europe process" and agreed "to seek an input from the Committee members and observers on how to better reflect a COVID-19 response that supports further progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Programme of Work of the Environment Subprogramme" and mandated the Bureau with support from the secretariat to prepare the Committee's input for the information for the ECE Executive Committee". The CEP also agreed "to further discuss impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic, including on the Environment for Europe process, at its next regular session".