

## **The UNECE Water Convention: objectives, modalities of work, activities and possibilities for cooperation**

This paper aims to provide information to the participants of the EFC Working Party on the Management of Mountain Watersheds about the Water Convention, the activities in the programme of work, especially those of relevance for the Working Party, in view of a potential cooperation on specific elements of the Convention's work programme.

### **Introduction to the legal basis: main obligations of the Convention**

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (UNECE Water Convention) was signed in Helsinki in 1992 and entered into force in 1996. As of August 2008, 35 countries and the European Community are Parties to the Convention.

The objectives of the Convention comprise:

- Protection of transboundary waters (both surface and groundwaters) by preventing, controlling and reducing transboundary impacts - including impacts on human health and safety, flora, fauna, soil, climate, landscape and historical monuments or other physical structures as well as impacts on the cultural heritage or socio-economic conditions;
- Ecologically sound and rational management of transboundary waters;
- Reasonable and equitable use of transboundary waters and therefore prevention of conflicts;
- Conservation and restoration of ecosystems.

The Convention explicitly recognises the need to apply a number of basic principles such as the precautionary principle, the polluter-pays-principle, and the principle of sustainable management of water resources. It also includes two major categories of obligations.

The first, more general, obligations apply to all Parties and include licensing and monitoring wastewater discharges; setting emission limits for discharges from point sources based on the best available technology; application of best environmental practices to reduce inputs of nutrients and hazardous substances from agriculture and other diffuse sources; environmental impact assessment; development of contingency plans; setting of water-quality objectives; and minimization of the risk of accidental water pollution. The second category of obligations is more specific and must be implemented by Parties sharing transboundary waters. Such Riparian Parties are obliged to conclude specific bilateral or multilateral agreements providing for the establishment of joint bodies which can for example be river basin Commissions.

### **Organization of work under the Convention**

The Convention does not only exist on paper, but it is a "living Convention": it has developed bodies responsible for the implementation of its programme of work, it aims to support Parties and non-Parties in ratifying and implementing the Convention etc..

The *Meeting of the Parties* to the Water Convention is the highest decision body under the Water Convention. It meets every three years and adopts the work plan. It is responsible for the implementation of the Water Convention and its work plan, the revision of water policies and guidance to the Parties.

In addition, there are a number of bodies implementing the work plan.

The *Working Group on Integrated Water Resources Management* reviews the implementation of the work plan at least once a year. It mainly focuses on inter-sectoral water management issues to prevent, control and reduce transboundary impact. It also facilitates the work of joint bodies and aims to provide guidance for the drawing-up, revision, adaptation and implementation of bilateral and multilateral agreements on transboundary waters.

The *Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment* helps Parties bordering the same transboundary waters to establish and implement joint programmes for monitoring and assessing the conditions of transboundary waters as well as transboundary impacts and the effectiveness of measures taken to prevent, control and reduce transboundary impacts.

To implement the programme of work specific Task Forces and Expert Groups have been created such as the Task Force on Water and Climate or the Joint ad hoc expert group on water and industrial accidents (established under the Water Convention and the Industrial Accidents Convention).

The *Legal Board* assists the other bodies on legal questions related to the Convention and its Protocol, e.g. development of model regulations and assistance to Parties on legal aspects.

### **Main areas of work under the Convention**

The Water Convention's work focuses on three main areas:

- (a) Assistance to implementation of the Convention in particular in countries with economies in transition;
- (b) Tools to deal with emerging issues such as climate change and payment for ecosystem services, and
- (c) Assessment of the Convention's effectiveness and of future needs.

There are three main kinds of activities

- (a) First of all, strategic and technical guidelines are developed under the Convention on specific issues related to transboundary water management, such as Guidelines on Monitoring and Assessment of Transboundary and International Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters or Model provisions on transboundary flood management.
- (b) Secondly, the Convention develops capacity-building activities, for example through organizing various workshops. An example is the Capacity for Water Cooperation (CWC) project which is intended to strengthen the capacity of transboundary water management in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.
- (c) Finally, the Convention develops a number of pilot or implementation projects to develop the legal basis for cooperation, build institutions, monitoring and assessment of transboundary waters, etc.

The current work plan includes, among others, activities on ecosystem services. The “Recommendations on Payments for ecosystem services in Integrated Water Resources Management” were elaborated in cooperation with the forest sector, and adopted by the last Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention in November 2006. It is planned to support the implementation of the Recommendations through capacity building and pilot projects.

Climate change is already showing impacts on water and water-related ecosystems, thus adaptation of water management is essential. However, very few countries have developed adaptation strategies so far. Therefore, the last Meeting of the Parties recognized the importance of this topic - water and Climate adaptation in transboundary basins - for the Convention. A Guidance on water and adaptation to climate change is currently being developed and is expected to be adopted at the next meetings of the Parties.

Following the successful release of the first comprehensive Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters in the UNECE region in 2007, preparations for the second edition have started in 2008. The second edition will put a special focus on IWRM, the assessment of water related ecosystems such as wetlands (in cooperation with the Ramsar Convention), Central Asia and institutional aspects of transboundary water management.

Since late 2006, the National Policy Dialogues on IWRM pillar have been implemented in line with the EU Water Framework Directive, the UNECE Water Convention, and the Protocol on Water and Health. The final aim of the dialogue process is to introduce policy packages (e.g. new governmental regulations), in order to improve the implementation of IWRM. Currently, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine participate in these policy dialogues with different country specific objectives. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, the current specific objective is to assist in the setting up of a River Basin Council for the Chu basin. At a later stage, the policy dialogue will also cover sustainable use of water resources taking into account climate change, the protection of water ecosystems and water-and-health issues.

For more information on the work of the Water Convention please visit:  
<http://www.unece.org/env/water/>

### **Possible cooperation with the EFC Working Party on the Management of Mountain Watersheds**

The Water Convention would welcome cooperation and contribution from the EFC Working Party to relevant activities of its work plan. Possibilities include, for instance:

- comments and input from Working Party members to the draft Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change
- cooperation on activities related to Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES)

The next meeting of the Water Convention’s Working Group on Integrated Water Resources Management, during the European Forest Week on 22-24 October in Rome would be a good opportunity to further specify future cooperation.

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