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Working Group on Water and Health

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INFORMAL DOCUMENT

Draft vision and strategy for the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health

Prepared by the Bureau with the support of the joint secretariat

Summary

The present document outlines the draft vision and strategy for the implementation of the Protocol on Water and Health. The Bureau held strategic discussions on the vision for the Protocol and its future development at its 29th meeting (Geneva, 10-11 May 2023) and 30th meeting (Geneva, 15 November 2023) and prepared the present document, with the support of the joint secretariat.

The Working Group on Water and Health is invited to provide its comments on the proposed vision for the Protocol and strategy for its implementation and discuss the way forward towards the submission of the document to the 7th session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health planned to be held in November 2025, for its review and adoption.

VISION AND STRATEGY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH

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1. VISION STATEMENT FOR THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH

The Protocol on Water and Health is a driving force for a world with universal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, free from waterborne diseases, and a clean and healthy environment for present and future generations.

2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Protocol on Water and Health is the first and only legally binding agreement focusing on the interlinkages between water, sanitation, hygiene, and health. It aims to protect human health and well-being through sustainable water management and prevention of water-related diseases, including with a focus on ensuring safe and equitable access to water and sanitation for all as human rights. Jointly serviced by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe), the Protocol has provided a pan-European platform to convene environment/water and health communities since 2005 and stimulated intersectoral cooperation. The implementation of the Protocol has triggered the creation of inter-ministerial working groups at the national level in most of its current Parties,¹ thus setting a good standard in successfully working across several sectors.

The present document outlining the draft vision for the Protocol on Water and Health and a strategy for its implementation was developed by the Bureau of the Protocol with the support of the joint secretariat. The implementation strategy sets out the mid-and long-term goals of the Protocol to support Member States and the global community in addressing current and emerging challenges for the water and sanitation sector, such as the climate crisis, water-related disease outbreaks, environmental pollution, epidemics such as COVID-19 and other emergencies until 2040 and beyond, as well as to progressively realize the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

The priorities for work under the Protocol are identified and/or re-confirmed on a triannual basis and laid down in the Protocol programmes of work,² with corresponding activities addressing those priorities.

The present document aims to communicate to Parties, other States, partner organizations, development agencies, financial institutions, and civil society representatives the vision and priorities of the Protocol and what its framework offers.

3. STRATEGIC GOALS OF THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH

The strategy of the Protocol on Water and Health is built around five goals:

Strategic goal 1: Strengthen water, sanitation, hygiene, health, and environmental governance and policies through increased accession to the Protocol and promotion of its tools, including at the global level.

Joining the Protocol on Water and Health allows countries to operationalize the inter-sectoral nature to achieve its objectives as stipulated under Articles 1 and 6. It also allows countries to

¹ For information on the status of accession please visit the UN Treaty Collection webpage [here](#).

² See <https://unece.org/programme-work-4>.

set a common standard for protecting water resources and human health. With more Parties, the Protocol's relevance, recognition, and resource base will increase to promote universal access to safe and equitable water and sanitation as human rights. Enhanced outreach at regional and global levels allows more countries worldwide to take advantage of the tools and guidance developed under the Protocol's community and to exchange best practices to implement regional and global commitments.

Strategic goal 2: Protect public and environmental health through safe water and sanitation management for the prevention of water-quality incidents and water-related disease outbreaks and epidemics.

Water is fundamental to the health of humans, animals, and the environment. Many infectious diseases are transmitted through contaminated water. Access to safely managed water and sanitation services is essential in preventing such diseases. The Protocol requires Parties "to take due account of any potential impact of actions on public health" (Article 4) and supports them in adopting risk-based management approaches and strengthening systems for the surveillance of and response to water-related disease outbreaks.

Strategic goal 3: Ensure universal and equitable access to safe water and sanitation services for all in all settings.

Access to safe water and sanitation are fundamental human rights to which all people are entitled without discrimination. The Protocol requires Parties to ensure everyone has access to water and sanitation in all settings. It emphasizes providing equitable access to water and sanitation "for all members of the population, especially those who suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion" (Articles 5 and 6) and supports Parties in addressing existing inequalities, also by reducing geographical disparities.

Strategic goal 4: Protect the environment and water resources from source to end users.

Protected water resources and safely managed sanitation are essential for a clean environment and preventing water-related diseases – cornerstones of public health, well-being, and socio-economic development. Article 4 of the Protocol stipulates that Parties must ensure "adequate sanitation of a standard which sufficiently protects human health and the environment" and "shall require public authorities which are considering taking action [...] that may have a significant impact on the environment of any waters within the scope of this Protocol to take due account of any potential impact of that action on public health".

Strategic goal 5: Address climate change impacts and other emerging challenges impacting water, sanitation and hygiene services.

The Protocol supports countries in strengthening climate resilience and preparedness to water-related disasters, extreme weather events and other climate-induced effects in order to ensure safe and climate-resilient management of drinking water and sanitation services. . Although climate change considerations had not been explicitly mentioned in the legal text of the Protocol at the time of adopting, its article 5 refers to the management of water resources "*so that the needs of the present generations are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*".

4. HOW TO ACHIEVE THE STRATEGIC GOALS

Concrete actions are listed in the implementation actions below, together with responsible actors to substantiate and implement the strategic goals. These actions should be seen as illustrative and non-exhaustive. Due to their inter-connectedness, all implementation actions stipulated below jointly contribute to achieving the five overarching strategic goals under the Protocol.

Implementation action 1: Increased accession, capacity and awareness of the Protocol on Water and Health, its framework, and the guidance tools it provides

Implementation action 1 lays the foundation for achieving all five strategic goals under this vision and strategy, as it intends to promote the legal framework by increased accession, capacity and the uptake of the guidance and tools developed under the Protocol.

In the short to medium term, accession aims to significantly increase Protocol membership by covering at least two-thirds of countries in the pan-European region, including regional organizations, such as the European Union (EU). The Protocol has been proven to support the implementation of relevant water-related EU directives, such as the EU Drinking Water Directive and the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, and some of its tools are therefore particularly beneficial for the EU Member States and EU-candidate countries. With more Parties, the Protocol's relevance, recognition, and resource base will increase to harmonize approaches and promote universal access to safe and equitable water and sanitation as human rights.

There is a need to increase the prominence of the Protocol at the political level, with the vision of becoming a leading hub for strategic discussions on priority issues on the interface of water, sanitation, and health, including other dimensions, such as climate change.

This requires, among others, further strengthening the role of national Protocol focal points responsible for coordinating activities related to the Protocol across relevant ministries and promoting and increasing awareness of the Protocol at the national and international levels. As the Protocol's approach is cross-sectoral by nature, focal points could further foster the exchange and collaboration nationally to develop and implement policy more effectively. In implementing projects on the ground, national focal points have a particular leading role in leveraging effective water, sanitation, hygiene, and health policy-making. The focal points also play a key role, with the secretariat's support, in increasing the prominence of the Protocol among Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Permanent Missions in Geneva and New York. Participation in relevant national, regional, and global events on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is crucial in raising awareness and knowledge of the usefulness and applicability of the Protocol to a broader audience.

Global water conferences could be leveraged to promote the Protocol, such as the UN Water Conferences 2026 and 2028 and its follow-up to the Conferences to demonstrate its usefulness in driving the WASH agenda toward closing the water and sanitation gap. Increasing the visibility of the Protocol is not limited to the UN Water Conferences but also entails active participation in other global inter-governmental meetings on the environment and health, such as the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the World Health Assembly, and the World Water Forum.

From a long-term perspective, increased awareness of the Protocol contributes to the goal of global promotion. Broadening the geographical scope could increase influence and position the Protocol globally in achieving water, sanitation, hygiene, and health targets. Additionally, it allows for sharing experiences from which pan-European countries could benefit, particularly in adapting to climate-induced extreme weather events in the water and sanitation sector from which other regions are impacted strongly. However, while a global promotion of the Protocol brings benefits, it requires additional staff and initial financial resources to support the promotion outside the UNECE region.

Given the heterogeneity of the pan-European region, the Protocol offers tools and guidance to address the situation in low- and high-income countries, which provides opportunities to apply its guidance and tools also in other regions of the world and simultaneously increase the global prominence of the Protocol.

In addition, the appointment of an “Ambassador on WASH” to promote the work of the Protocol with a substantive focus on WASH matters significantly contributes to the global promotion of the Protocol. An ambassador on WASH, such as a public or former political figure who is influential and known among societies, can engage in advocacy efforts and be present in the media landscape, conferences, and events to promote the importance of water, sanitation, hygiene, and health issues while taking advantage of its public profile to reach a broader audience thus raising public awareness about the Protocol and its objectives. In addition to that, ambassadors often have extensive networks with decision-makers, NGOs, and other organizations, which can be leveraged to consolidate stronger partnerships.

Implementation action 2: Increased coherence with regional and global processes

Strengthening policy, technical and scientific work lays the foundation to build on the competitive advantage of the Protocol. In the context of positioning the Protocol in strategic topics, particularly in increasing resilience to climate change and other emerging challenges (objective 4), it is crucial to increase synergies of the work of the Protocol with other regional and global processes. The flexibility of the Protocol provides an opportunity as its programme of work can be adapted in a timespan of every three years, making the Protocol adaptable to changing boundary conditions in the water, sanitation, health and environment landscape. This helps to align the development of guidance and tools to regional and global processes to implement declarations arising from them.

Global process

As the decision-making body of the World Health Organization (WHO), closer alignment with resolutions arising from the World Health Assembly (WHA) is needed to drive action on water, sanitation, hygiene, and health in the pan-European region and beyond. This includes aligning the Protocol’s programme of work and developing guidance tools with relevant guidelines and resolutions adopted by WHA. In line with this, the latest scientific and public health advancements endorsed by WHA should inform periodic reviews and updates of the Protocol’s priorities and work programmes. The Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) and GLAAS (Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water), led by WHO and UNICEF, call for a closer alignment to the target-setting and reporting mechanism under the Protocol due to their monitoring of global process towards water, sanitation, and hygiene goals.

The mandatory target-setting mechanism could also be useful to align with targets deriving from global climate processes, such as National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and, to a lesser extent, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and to increase accountability for implementation, particularly in the context of reporting. Additionally, the reporting system under the Protocol could entail a climate dimension to report on Parties' and non-Parties' actions on the interface of water, sanitation, hygiene, health, and climate change. Additionally, the outcomes of the work of increasing resilience to climate change under the Protocol could be presented at United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) events such as its Conference of the Parties and other UNFCCC processes. Since water and climate-resilient water and sanitation services are now mentioned in the global goal on adaptation adopted at COP29, further work in this field will be needed. Building a partnership with the UNFCCC would require long-term investment and human capacity.

Through its mandatory target-setting and reporting process, the Protocol on Water and Health could further explore how to ensure that these are aligned with broader water-related goals and targets decided at the global level, such as the SDGs and their possible successors. This alignment could involve harmonizing indicators to promote consistency and coherence and strengthen the interconnectedness of these processes.

Ensuring the continuation of water and sanitation services during humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods is essential in mitigating the spread of diseases and warranting safe access to water and sanitation. The Protocol's tools and guidance support the emergency responsiveness of water and sanitation service providers and health authorities in managing emergencies. However, aligning the work of the Protocol with humanitarian aspects concerning WASH calls for collaboration with partners and processes in the humanitarian sector to address the specific needs of affected populations during a crisis.

Regional process

The Protocol was born out of the European Environment and Health Process, where it was adopted in 1999. That process consists of a series of ministerial conferences held every five years and coordinated by WHO/Europe in cooperation with UNECE and UNEP. It aims to eliminate the most significant environmental threats to human health. Hence, the European Environment and Health Process offers a significant opportunity for the Protocol to lead the definition of policies and strategies under the process and align its work programs to the agreed priorities. In consideration of the usefulness of the Protocol in driving action on the water, sanitation, hygiene, and health agenda in the pan-European region, the Protocol should nevertheless remain adaptable to changing boundary conditions, particularly to more broadly align to the challenges stipulated in Declarations arising from the European Environment and Health Process. The usefulness of the Protocol in supporting the environment and health process in the region is highlighted in the Budapest Declaration, adopted at the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, 5-7 July 2023), which calls for the "leveraging of the Protocol on Water and Health as a regional policy instrument supporting the implementation of commitments at the national level, also capitalizing on the Protocol's technical tools and resources".

The Protocol can and has been proven to support the implementation of relevant water-related EU directives. The Protocol provides tools, practical guidance, and examples of achieving some of these objectives. Linking the Protocol to current and future EU policies and legislation

is important in implementing the Directives, particularly for guaranteeing access to water and sanitation to vulnerable and marginalized communities and establishing risk-based approaches to managing water supply and sanitation. The guidance documents and tools developed under the Protocol assist countries in coherently implementing the obligations from current and by anticipating regional and global trends and future directives. The recast EU Drinking Water Directive explicitly refers to the Protocol on Water and Health as “Members States could make use of the guidance documents developed under the remit of that Protocol to assess the policy background and the baseline situation on access to water and to define the actions necessary to improve equitable access for all to water intended for human consumption”.

Implementation action 3: Increased partnerships to implement the objectives

Partnerships and collaborations play a crucial role in advancing the WASH and health agenda under the Protocol on Water and Health, meaning that it is of significant importance to strengthen and leverage current partnerships and establish new ones to consolidate the Protocol in the WASH sphere and to establish it in new fields such as emergency responsiveness, antimicrobial resistance, and One Health. Therefore, building solid partnerships is crucial in advancing the objectives outlined in the Protocol vision, which allows diverse perspectives, expertise, grassroots engagement, and local participation. More time and efforts are required to build long-lasting relationships with various partners through active outreach and involvement at thematic events:

- Concerning the *human rights to water and sanitation*, the collaboration will be further strengthened with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to water and sanitation to advance the implementation of these universal human rights at national, regional, and global levels. The strategic partnership between the joint secretariat and OHCHR was announced through a joint commitment to the Water Action Agenda after the UN 2023 Water Conference in New York. Collaboration and partnerships with NGPs such as the End Water Poverty, WaterAid, Water Integrity Network, and Sanitation and Water for All are essential to get people’s voices heard and enhance public participation in driving the WASH agenda.
- Collaborating with organizations focusing on *climate change adaptation and mitigation* in the water, sanitation, hygiene, and health contexts is crucial to coherently address the impact of climate change on water resources and promote sustainable water management practices. In line with this, the Protocol could leverage partnerships with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Office for Disaster Reduction (UNDRR), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), WaterAid, World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the, and other NGPs and partners.
- Collaboration will also be strengthened with organizations focusing on *antimicrobial resistance and One Health* to address the interconnected challenges of water quality, health, and the spread of antimicrobial-resistant bacteria. Organizations to leverage partnerships are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO),

UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UNICEF, the World Bank – Global Antimicrobial Resistance Hub and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE),

- It is crucial to strengthen collaboration with *universities and research institutions*, particularly concerning data collection and evidence-based approaches in developing and implementing WASH policies and projects. Strengthened partnerships could entail the stronger involvement of universities and research institutions in project implementation under the Protocol.
- Furthermore, building strategic partnerships with *civil society and youth organizations* is crucial to enhancing the effectiveness of the Protocol on the ground. Civil society organizations from the domains of water, environment, human rights, and others often represent a broad range of stakeholders, particularly vulnerable and marginalized communities. This allows the Protocol to widen its perspective and more effectively reach communities with the highest stake in water, sanitation, hygiene, and health. Additionally, civil society organizations often have experts in the water quality and health field, which allows for effective collaboration by taking advantage of their practical knowledge in revising and developing guidance documents and tools under the Protocol.
- Collaboration with water and sanitation service providers and regulators will be further strengthened.
- Enhancing the collaboration between the Protocol on Water and Health and *UN Resident Coordinators/ UN country teams*, in line with the UN-system-wide strategy on water and sanitation, significantly reinforces the Protocol's effectiveness in achieving its national objectives. Resident Coordinators, for example, can facilitate the implementation of the Protocol at the national level by ensuring that its implementation is integrated into country-specific strategies and programs, such as common country analysis and cooperation frameworks, and by leveraging their position to raise awareness about the importance of water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Implementation action 4: Sustainable and predictable resources for implementation of the Protocol and advancing the WASH agenda

Overall, the global WASH agenda requires sustainable and predictable resources, entailing financial investments, human resources, effective policy-making, and technological innovations. These resources are fundamental in ensuring universal access to water and sanitation, building and maintaining reliable water and sanitation infrastructure, promoting hygiene practices, and monitoring progress.

With the current and emerging challenges in the WASH landscape and the adaptability of the programme of work, implementation of the Protocol heavily depends on the strong commitment of Parties and Lead Parties. This commitment entails political support in the national, regional, and global promotion of the Protocol, ownership of responsible programme areas (if any), and financial support, both earmarked and unearmarked. Additionally, Lead Parties under the Protocol function as knowledge hubs in the respective programme areas and hence heavily contribute to the exchange of best practices and technical development of guidance tools.

The Protocol’s legal framework, entailing mandatory target-setting and reporting mechanisms, effectively complements action in the WASH agenda. However, implementing the Protocol’s programmes of work and effectively servicing its inter-governmental platform requires sustainable financial contributions from Parties and, as relevant, from other States and partners.

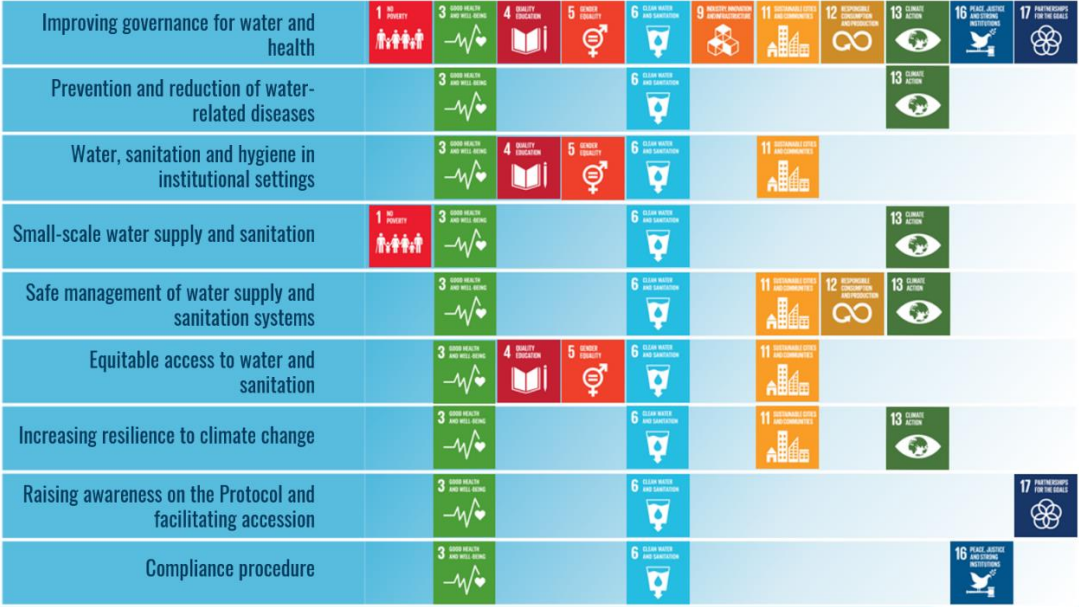


Figure 1 The Protocol on Water and Health’s 2023-2025 programme of work and its alignment to the SDGs

5. WHAT THE PROTOCOL ON WATER AND HEALTH OFFERS

Since its entry into force in 2005, the UNECE-WHO/Europe Protocol on Water and Health has contributed to significant achievements in the pan-European region, including improved access to safe drinking water and sanitation, reduced waterborne diseases, enhanced environmental protection, and increased cooperation among sectors and countries. While the Protocol primarily focuses on the pan-European region, its framework approaches, guidance documents, and innovative tools can be applied globally. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres emphasized that the Protocol provides governments with concrete tools to realize human rights, build resilience to climate change, and prepare for future pandemics.

The Protocol constitutes the first and only legally binding agreement focusing on the interlinkages between water, sanitation, hygiene, and health. Its objective and emphasis lay in the importance of ensuring equitable access to safe drinking water and sanitation services for everyone, in all settings, with a particular focus on the human rights to water and sanitation. In line with this, the Protocol aims to prevent and control water-related diseases by setting standards and guidelines on sustainable water management. It stimulates effective intersectoral cooperation within around 40 countries of the pan-European region, particularly triggering the creation of inter-ministerial working groups at the national level working across environment/water and health sectors.

Indeed, the Protocol's inters-sectoral and public participation approach fosters integration and collaboration across different sectors to achieve its objectives and targets. Engaging various sectors in issues surrounding water, sanitation, hygiene, and health recognizes that actions in one policy area commonly impact others due to their interconnectedness. This cross-sectoral approach manifests in appointing focal points from Ministries of Health, Environment, and

beyond. The Protocol contributes to a more effective inter-ministerial collaboration at national scale through its inter-governmental platform and implementation at national level.

The Protocol also contributes to better management of drinking water and sanitation services through the exchange of practical experience, lessons learned, best practices and peer-to-peer support between Parties and non-Parties to the Protocol.

To date, countries of the pan-European region have effectively leveraged the Protocol to translate and advance SDG ambitions and European Union directives on water and sanitation into practice at the national level. Roughly 30 countries, Parties and non-Parties with varying socio-economic development, have set, implemented, and revised mandatory inter-sectoral targets on water, wastewater, hygiene, and health. The triennially mandated reporting and review process helps countries document progress on implementing these targets and assess further vulnerabilities and gaps to be addressed. The reporting and review process thus also provides a unique opportunity to gather data on water, sanitation, and health holistically in the pan-European region that can further inform decision-making or serve as the basis for future (research) projects to address identified limitations.

The joint secretariat, Bureau, and Meeting of the Parties of the Protocol on Water and Health are heavily engaged at policy and technical levels with a strong focus on scientific developments. Hence, a wealth of guidance documents and tools have been developed to support countries in achieving their targets, touching upon various dimensions in their journey to drive action on WASH, such as affordability of water and sanitation and financing of small-scale systems, risk-based approaches, including water and sanitation safety plans, methodologies for rapid assessment of WASH in school, systems for outbreak surveillance and management of water-related disease and others that are continuously being developed.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS *(to be further developed)*

- Paragraph restating the main strategic priorities as aligned with the vision statement
- Paragraph with a summary of the implementation actions contributing to the overarching objectives
- Paragraph outlining the monitoring of implementation of the vision and strategy as well as the need to revise the vision to align with successor of SDGs, as relevant