

UNECE

The Protocol on Water and Health

Driving action on water,
sanitation, hygiene and health



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A UNIQUE AGREEMENT



The Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes is an international legally binding agreement for countries in the pan-European region. Its objective is to protect human health and well-being through sustainable water management and by preventing and controlling water-related diseases.

The Protocol was adopted in 1999, when 36 states came together at the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in London, United Kingdom. The vision was then – as it is now – to develop an instrument that helps governments to improve water, sanitation, hygiene and health conditions across their countries, and to sustain their improved status in the long term (see Box 1).

The Protocol is a unique agreement in many ways.

- Globally, it is the first and only treaty that focuses on water, sanitation, hygiene and health.
- It combines environmental protection with promotion of human health, bringing together various sectors and professional communities such as environmentalists, public health professionals, hydrologists, epidemiologists and water, sanitation and hygiene professionals.
- It covers the entire water cycle, including water-resource protection, the drinking-water supply chain from catchment to consumption and the sanitation chain from collection and treatment of wastewater to its discharge and reuse, as well as water used for recreation.
- It was a precursor to the human rights to safe drinking-water and sanitation and to Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water and sanitation, and it promotes equitable access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene for all in all settings.
- It promotes effective responses to outbreaks of water-related diseases and management of risks arising from extreme weather events and other climate risks.



Box 1.

Water, sanitation and hygiene as priorities for action

Safe water and adequate sanitation and hygiene are basic conditions for **dignity, human health and well-being**, as well as for a **safe and clean environment**. Simple things like having access to safe drinking-water, to soap and safe water for hand-washing, to adequate toilet facilities that are well maintained and prevent environmental contamination can go a long way to preventing the spread of infectious diseases and ensuring sustainable development.

Clean water, safe sanitation and adequate hygiene are also crucial for:

- safeguarding the attainment of human rights and gender equality;
- providing high-quality health care in hospitals and other facilities;
- ensuring that schools and other learning environments are safe and inclusive for all children.

CORE PROVISIONS OF THE PROTOCOL

The Protocol requires Parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure:

- adequate supplies of safe drinking-water for everyone, including water for personal hygiene;
- adequate sanitation for everyone, of a standard that protects human health and the environment;
- protection of water resources used as sources of drinking-water and their related ecosystems;
- sufficient safeguards for human health against water-related diseases, including improving and maintaining effective surveillance systems for water quality and water-related diseases.

To achieve these objectives, the Protocol's core provisions address setting targets on water, sanitation, hygiene and health; surveillance and response to water-related diseases; public engagement and public information; and international cooperation.

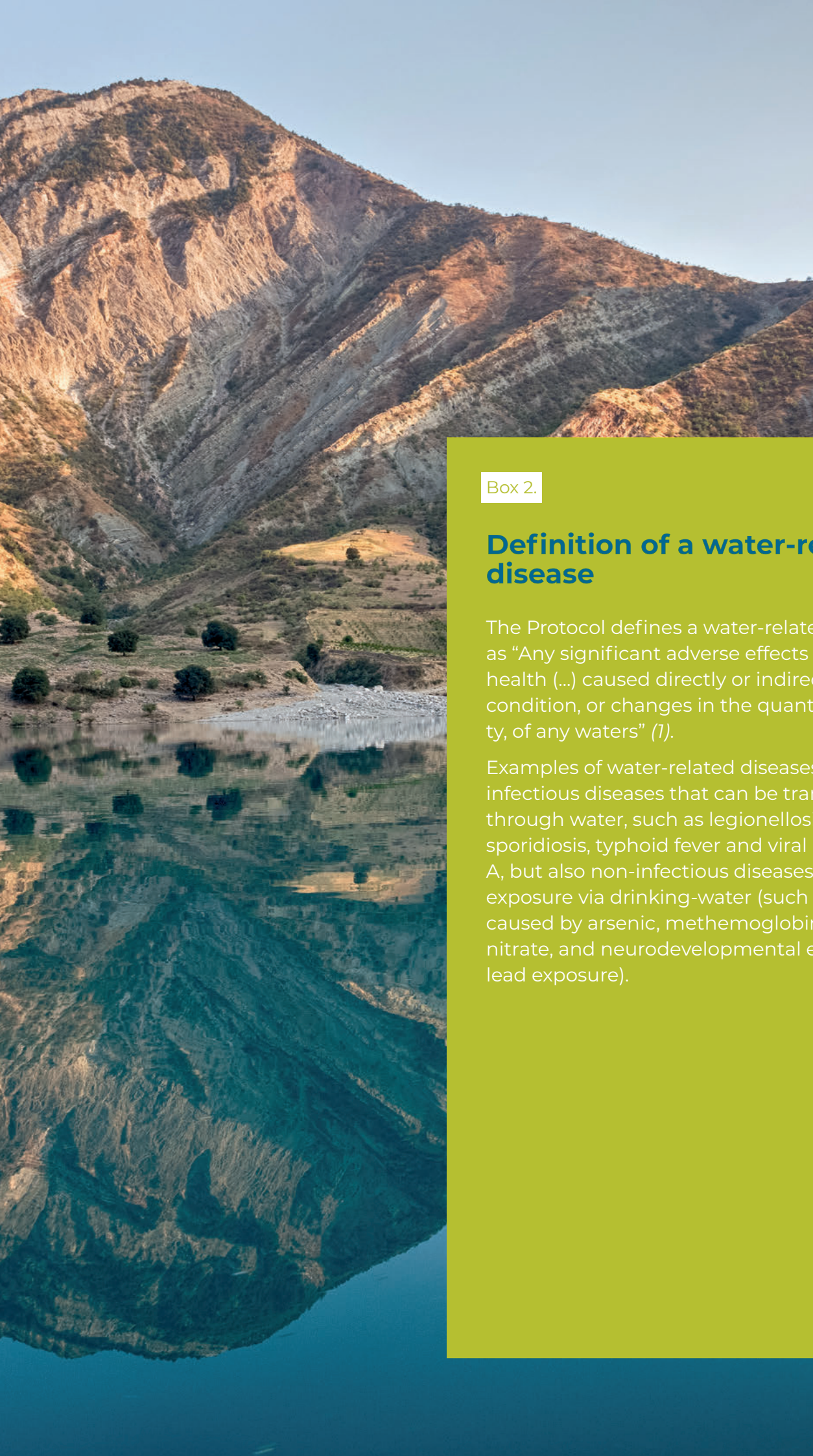
A main obligation under the Protocol is to **set concrete and measurable targets on water, sanitation, hygiene and health** that provide a pathway for stepwise improvement, taking into account countries' needs, priorities and socioeconomic situations. Targets should be set following a baseline analysis of the prevailing situation in the country and should be accompanied by realistic action plans, outlining time-bound measures, responsible institutions and financial resources for implementation.

Every three years, **countries submit summary reports** providing comprehensive accounts of their progress in achieving the targets and an overview of the national situation with respect to water, sanitation and hygiene. The reporting cycle offers a rich data hub, providing an account of the situation in the region and information on existing environmental and health legislation and policies.

The Protocol requires Parties to establish, maintain and improve national and local systems for **surveillance and early warning of water-related diseases** (see further information in Box 2). Having functional surveillance systems in place is important to identify outbreaks or incidents of disease in a timely fashion, facilitating prompt responses by the authorities and disclosure of information to the public. Parties are also required to develop contingency plans and to ensure that authorities hold up the necessary **response capacity**.

The Protocol has dedicated provisions for strengthening **public awareness, education and training**, and to ensure the accessibility of **public information**.

The Protocol promotes **international cooperation** on water, sanitation, hygiene and health. It provides an institutional framework through which policy-makers and experts meet regularly, fostering mutual assistance and peer-to-peer support between countries.



Box 2.

Definition of a water-related disease

The Protocol defines a water-related disease as “Any significant adverse effects on human health (...) caused directly or indirectly by the condition, or changes in the quantity or quality, of any waters” (1).

Examples of water-related diseases include infectious diseases that can be transmitted through water, such as legionellosis, cryptosporidiosis, typhoid fever and viral hepatitis A, but also non-infectious diseases caused by exposure via drinking-water (such as cancer caused by arsenic, methemoglobinemia by nitrate, and neurodevelopmental effects by lead exposure).

BENEFITS OF THE PROTOCOL

When joining the Protocol community, countries inscribe their national efforts on water, sanitation and hygiene, environment and health into an international framework, deriving concrete benefits including:

- influence on international policy and decision-making on water, sanitation and hygiene, including identifying regional priorities to be reflected in the Protocol's activities;
- engagement in the development of the Protocol's technical resources, including evidence-based guidance materials and practical tools for both policy-makers and water, sanitation and hygiene professionals;
- targeted support and capacity-building through cross-country exchange, technical assistance and international projects;
- increased visibility for national activities and achievements on water, sanitation and hygiene.

Furthermore, implementing the Protocol means that countries set targets, review them regularly and report on progress, thereby **strengthening accountable water, sanitation, hygiene and health governance**.

The targets can also provide a reliable framework to channel donor support.

The Protocol helps countries to **integrate water, sanitation and hygiene priorities under one coherent framework** across different sectors, including environment, public health, finance, agriculture, rural development, education, justice and home affairs. Typically implemented through the establishment or use of existing interministerial working groups, in some countries these also include representatives of civil society, professional associations and human rights institutions.

Countries are better able to **respond to epidemics and achieve an inclusive recovery**, alongside **strengthening preparedness against future epidemics**. The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of the crucial role of proper water, sanitation and hygiene services as a first line of defence

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