

THE GLOBAL OPENING

of the 1992 Water Convention



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The present publication is an updated version of the original version published in 2013. It reflects the latest changes up to March 2016, in particular the operationalization of the amendments to the Convention allowing Member States from outside the UNECE region to accede to the Convention.

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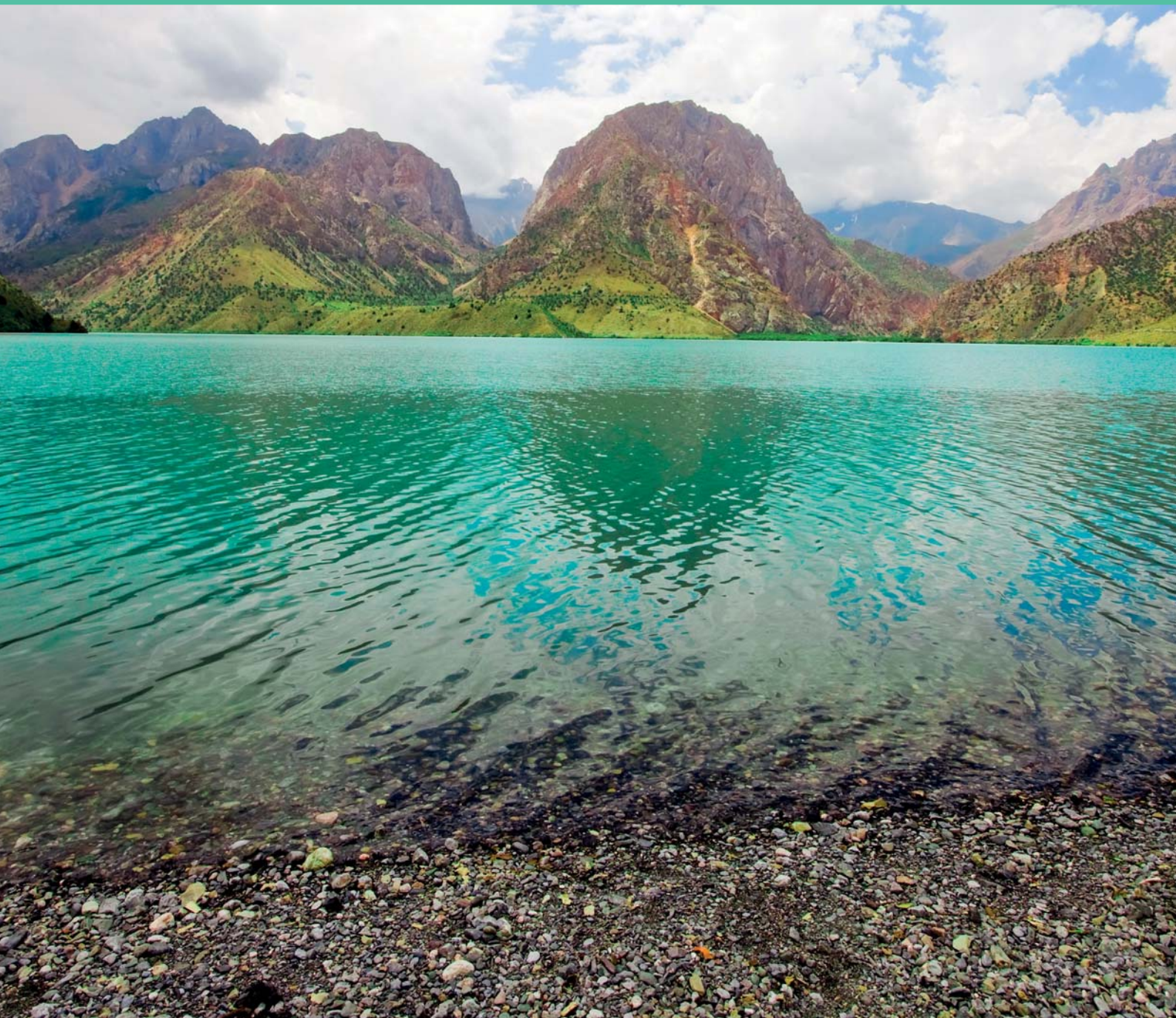
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Since the 1990s, the Water Convention has supported the development of transboundary agreements, the establishment of joint institutions and the strengthening of cooperation at both political and technical levels, in the pan-European region.

THE 1992 WATER CONVENTION

Two Decades of Successful Cooperation

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) was adopted in Helsinki in 1992 and entered into force in 1996. As of March 2016, it counts 41 Parties – almost all countries sharing transboundary waters in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).¹

The Water Convention strengthens transboundary water cooperation and measures for the ecologically-sound management and protection of transboundary surface waters and groundwaters. The Convention fosters the implementation of integrated water resources management, in particular the basin approach whereby the management is organized at the level of basins. The Convention's implementation supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and other global commitments.

The Water Convention requires Parties to prevent, control and reduce transboundary impact, use transboundary waters in a reasonable and equitable way and ensure their sustainable management. Parties bordering the same transboundary waters have to cooperate by entering into specific agreements

and establishing joint bodies. As a framework agreement, the Convention does not replace bilateral and multilateral agreements for specific basins or aquifers; instead, it fosters their establishment and implementation, as well as further development. The Convention enshrines a balanced approach, based on equality and reciprocity that offers benefits to and places similar demands on both upstream and downstream countries.

Since the 1990s, the Water Convention has supported the development of transboundary agreements, the establishment of joint institutions and the strengthening of cooperation at both political and technical levels, in the pan-European region. This has happened in very diverse circumstances, including in the context of economic transition and political tensions, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia

¹ The UNECE region includes 56 countries located in the European Union (EU), non-EU Western Europe, South-East Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and North America. As of March 2016, the following countries and organizations are Parties to the Water Convention: Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and European Union. For the updated status of participation, see http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&lang=en.

and Czechoslovakia. By its nature, the Convention is a flexible tool applicable in very different social, economic, political, environmental and hydrological situations.

The Convention has made a clear difference on the ground focusing on implementation and directly facilitating legal, technical and practical assistance. For example, the Convention has contributed to or served as a model for the transboundary agreements on the Chu-Talas, Danube, Dniester, Drin, Rhine and Sava Rivers, as well as agreements on the Belarus-Russian, Belarus-Ukrainian, Estonian-Russian, Kazakh-Russian, Mongolian-Russian, Russian-Ukrainian and many other transboundary waters. The Water Convention has provided a permanent intergovernmental forum to discuss trans-

boundary water cooperation, share experience and identify best practices in many areas. This has been an open and inclusive forum, supportive of building trust and finding common understanding – the crucial prerequisites to successful transboundary cooperation.

Moreover, over the past 20 years, the work under the Convention has evolved in response to the changing needs of Parties and often other countries, including from outside the UNECE region, for instance by addressing emerging issues such as ecosystem valuation, adaptation to climate change and the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus in the transboundary context. It has been a key driver for continuous progress on transboundary water cooperation.



WHAT DOES THE GLOBAL OPENING TO ALL UNITED NATIONS MEMBER STATES MEAN?

In 2003, Parties to the Water Convention amended it to allow accession by United Nations Member States outside the UNECE region.

Such a decision was taken because Parties to the Convention realized the advantages of opening the Convention's cooperative framework to the whole world – in particular, they wanted to offer its principles and provisions worldwide, share the experiences of the Convention, learn from other regions of the world and broaden political support for transboundary cooperation at the global level.

The amendments entered into force on 6 February 2013 and were ratified by all Parties that adopted them on 1 December 2015, turning the Water Convention into a global legal framework for transboundary water cooperation. Countries outside the UNECE region are now able to join the Convention. Parties from outside the UNECE region have the same rights and responsibilities as the UNECE Parties.

The implementation of the Water Convention at the global level is crucial as water demand in many areas of the world is unsustainable and the water resource situation is projected to aggravate in the coming decades due to increasing pressures from agriculture, energy

production and population growth. As international river basins account for nearly half of the earth's land surface and generate roughly 60% of global freshwater flow, transboundary water cooperation will be increasingly vital to prevent conflicts and ensure effective and sustainable use and management of shared resources. The Water Convention offers a framework, under the umbrella of the United Nations, to ensure water security, prevent conflicts over water and facilitate conflict resolution.

In recent years countries outside the UNECE region have expressed considerable interest in the Water Convention. More than 40 countries from outside the pan-European region have actively participated in the Convention's activities with, for example, pilot projects being undertaken in basins around the globe. Some countries have already expressed formal interest in acceding to the Convention, and some are considering accession. Parties to the Convention are working with several partners within and outside the United Nations System to strengthen capacity for the application of the Convention in countries outside the UNECE region and to prepare for a global membership.

"...[T]he UN Economic Commission for Europe's Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes [is] available to all UN Member States. I urge countries outside the UNECE region to join the Convention and further develop it."

– Message of Mr. Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General, on World Water Day, 22 March 2013

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES FOR STATES TO BECOME PARTY TO THE CONVENTION?

The advantages for countries to join the Water Convention include:

Solid international legal framework

By becoming a Party, a country joins the international legal regime of the Convention that has already proven its effectiveness over the past two decades and provides benefits for cooperation to both upstream and downstream countries.

Developed institutional platform

When becoming a Party, a country can participate in the Water Convention's institutional structure and decision-making, so fostering the implementation of the Convention and its further development. While the vast majority of the meetings under the Convention's framework are open to non-Parties, it is the Parties that decide on the development of the Convention, sit in the Convention's governing bodies and lead activities under the Convention.

Recognition by the international community

By being a Party to the Water Convention, a State signals to other countries, international organizations, financial institutions and other actors its willingness to cooperate on the basis of the norms and standards of the Convention. Such a State is respected by other actors in the international community for adhering to certain rules and standards.

Developing the Convention's regime

Parties to the Water Convention collectively decide on the development of the Convention's regime at the meetings of the Convention's gov-

erning bodies. They can initiate the negotiation of new legally-binding instruments such as protocols or amendments to the Convention. They can elaborate new soft-law instruments, such as guidelines, recommendations, model provisions, checklists and other tools. They can decide on the interpretation of the Convention. In this way, they participate in further developing the Convention and international water law.

Advice and sharing of experience

A Party to the Water Convention benefits from the existing experience under the Convention, e.g. its guidance documents, activities and projects on the ground. For example, a State suffering from frequent floods or droughts would benefit from the Convention's activities on adaptation to climate change or on transboundary flood management. A State interested in the joint management of water infrastructure on transboundary rivers would benefit from Convention's activities on dam safety. A basin struggling with the allocation of water for irrigation and energy production would benefit from the Convention's activities on the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus. The programme of work under the Convention is demand-driven and therefore able to respond to the differing and evolving needs of the Parties. All Parties – no matter whether “new” or “old” – actively participate in the sharing of knowledge and experience and learn from each other.

Support to bilateral and basin cooperation

The Water Convention not only obliges its Parties to enter into bilateral and multilateral agree-



ments for specific basins and establish joint bodies, but provides support to its Parties in establishing such agreements and bodies or in strengthening existing ones. This is particularly valuable in those basins where there are difficulties in achieving agreements.

Improvement of water management at the national level

The implementation of obligations under the Convention, especially of the obligation aimed at prevention, control and reduction of significant transboundary impact, improves water resources management at the national level. The Convention's standards to be applied by all Parties — e.g. pollution prevention, control and reduction at source, prior licensing of waste-water discharges, application of biological treatment or equivalent processes to municipal waste-water, or application of the ecosystems approach — enhance national systems for water resources management and protection.

Access to financial assistance and donor cooperation

Parties to the Water Convention may benefit from the use of the Convention's trust fund, which supports the effective implementation of the Convention. Interested Parties contribute voluntarily to the trust fund, so allowing them to target efficiently their assistance and to join forces with other donors in a coordinated way. The trust fund

can be used for technical support to Parties, particularly to promote and implement the Convention through the organization of seminars and other training activities, studies and pilot projects, as well as for support to participation of experts from eligible countries in workshops, seminars, symposia and other meetings organized within the framework of the Convention. While non-Parties can also benefit from the Convention's trust fund, priority is given to Parties.

Support from the community of Parties

The Water Convention is a collective forum. A Party may bring its needs and expectations to the attention of all other Parties. In other words, a Party is not left alone in its dealings with riparians – its concerns can be voiced at the Meeting of the Parties. The Convention's Implementation Committee can help Parties in all questions regarding implementation of the Convention and facilitate the settlement of the various differences and disputes.

Contribution to international peace and security

Participation in and cooperation through the intergovernmental platform of the Water Convention reduces uncertainty in relations between riparian States and helps prevent potential tensions, disagreements and differences, so contributing to the maintenance of international peace and security.

WHY SHOULD A COUNTRY JOIN WHEN IT ALREADY HAS TRANSBOUNDARY AGREEMENTS WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES?

Transboundary water cooperation does not end with the adoption of agreements with neighbouring countries – in fact, that is only the start!

The existence of a transboundary water agreement raises transboundary water cooperation to a certain level and allows the identification of new issues and the expansion of cooperation through a step-by-step approach. For example, undertaking joint or coordinated assessments of transboundary waters or setting up warning and alarm systems require a certain level of cooperation between riparian countries. However while the availability of an agreement and a joint institution in a basin brings in new opportunities for cooperation, it does not eliminate all challenges.

Using the intergovernmental platform of the Water Convention, Parties can openly discuss and resolve challenges and address new, more advanced issues in cooperation in specific basins through the exchange of experiences and good practices.

In fact, most Parties to the Convention are Parties to several bilateral or multilateral agreements and actively bring in their experience of cooperation in bilateral and multilateral settings to the discussions in the framework of the Convention's intergovernmental platform.



WHAT IS THE WATER CONVENTION'S INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM?

The institutional mechanism of the Water Convention is led by the Meeting of the Parties. The Meeting of the Parties is the highest political level where all important issues are decided.

The Meeting of the Parties holds its regular sessions every three years and adopts the programme of work for the next three-year period. In between the sessions of the Meeting of the Parties, the decision making is vested with the Bureau – an elected body comprising 12 Parties to the Convention from the various geographic regions under the Convention.

The Meeting of the Parties establishes working or subsidiary bodies to develop specific areas of work under the work programme. These include the Working Group on Integrated Water Resources Management, the Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment, the Implementation Committee, the Legal Board, the Joint Ad Hoc Expert Group on Water and Industrial Accidents, the International Water Assessment Centre and, currently, Task Forces on Water and Climate and on the Water-Food-Energy-Ecosystems Nexus.

Each body receives a clear mandate from the Meeting of the Parties and implements the activities in one or several areas of the programme of work. The exact set up of the working bodies therefore changes depending on the work programme of the Convention – this ensures flexibility and responsiveness to changing needs. The working bodies are the main venue for the exchange of experience and where cooperation develops in specific areas.



The Convention's secretariat is provided by UN-ECE. The secretariat is responsible for servicing the meetings under the Convention and assisting the Convention bodies in implementing the programme of work.

Countries joining the Water Convention become part of its institutional mechanism in the same way and on the same equal footing as current Parties. That is to say that they will have the same rights to participate in decision making, to be elected to the bodies of the Convention, to lead the activities under the Convention, to receive assistance and so on.

HOW DOES THE CONVENTION WORK?

The Water Convention's programme of work encompasses a variety of activities at different levels (multilateral, transboundary or basin, national) of both a technical and a political nature.

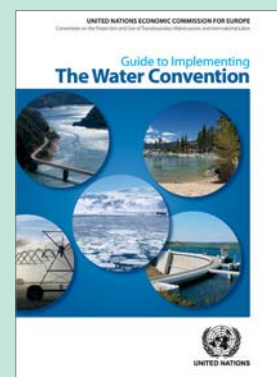
Activities are usually led by lead Parties and overseen by the respective bodies, e.g. by the Working Group on Integrated Water Resources Management or a specific Task Force.

The highlights of the programme of work for 2016–2018 include:

- Water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus assessment in selected transboundary basins worldwide on the basis of a methodology developed under the Convention, and exchange of experience;
- Identification, assessment and communication of the benefits of transboundary water cooperation in a number of pilot transboundary basins, and exchange of experience;
- Support to cooperation on adaptation of water resources to climate change in transboundary basins worldwide through pilot projects and exchange of experience ;
- Projects to facilitate the development and implementation of transboundary water agreements and joint institutions, for example, in the Aral Sea, Chu and Talas, Drin, Dniester, Kura, Neman and Pyanj (upper Amu Darya) Basins;
- Support and advice in national water sector reforms through the national policy dialogues in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia;
- Activities to support the global opening of the Convention by raising awareness on the Convention in other regions of the world through capacity building and exchange of experiences, supporting countries in their efforts to accede to the Convention and cooperating with partners;
- First pilot reporting exercise under the Convention.

SELECTED GUIDELINES AND OTHER SOFT-LAW INSTRUMENTS DEVELOPED UNDER THE WATER CONVENTION ²

- Recommendations on the prevention of water pollution from hazardous substances (1994)
- Guidelines on the prevention and control of water pollution from fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture (1995)
- Guidelines on licensing waste-water discharges from point sources into transboundary waters (1996)
- Guidelines on Monitoring and Assessment of Transboundary Rivers (1996, 2000)
- Guidelines on Monitoring and Assessment of Transboundary Groundwater (2000)
- Guidelines on Sustainable Flood Prevention (2000)
- Safety guidelines and good practices for pipelines (2006)
- Model Provisions on Transboundary Flood Management (2006)
- Recommendations on Payments for Ecosystem Services in Integrated Water Resources Management (2007)
- Safety Guidelines and Good Practices for Tailings Management Facilities (2009)
- Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change (2009)
- Guide to Implementing the Water Convention (2009, updated in 2013)
- Model Provisions on Transboundary Groundwaters (2012)
- Policy Guidance Note on the Benefits of Transboundary Water Cooperation: Identification, Assessment and Communication (2015)
- Principles for effective joint bodies for transboundary water cooperation (2015)



WATER CONVENTION ACTIVITIES: THE EXAMPLE OF ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Despite some uncertainties, climate change impacts are evident in many regions in the world and some of the effects are already visible. As many rivers in the world cross national boundaries, transboundary cooperation is necessary to prevent negative impacts of unilateral activities and to support the coordination of adaptation measures at the river-basin or aquifer level and joint development of more cost-effective solutions.

The Task Force on Water and Climate under the Water Convention was created in 2006 to address this challenge through different activities, including policy advice, field projects, capacity-building and exchange of experience.

The *Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change*, developed by the Task Force in 2007–2009 and adopted by the Meeting of the Parties in 2009, provides step-by-step advice to decision makers and water managers on how to assess the impacts of climate change on water quantity and quality, how to perform risk assessment (including health risk assessment), how to gauge vulnerability and how to design and implement appropriate adaptation strategies.

The programme of *pilot projects* on adaptation to climate change in transboundary basins aims to strengthen the capacity to adapt to climate change. The programme also creates positive examples demonstrating the benefits of transboundary cooperation in adaptation planning and implementation. The pilot projects each include joint impact and vulnerability assessment and the development of a basin-wide adaptation strategy. A core group of representatives of the pilot projects meets annually, which enables a direct exchange of experience between the projects.

From 2013, this programme has been broadened to include additional basins from several regions of the world. Currently, the *global network of basins working on adaptation to climate change* includes the basins of Chu and Talas, Congo, Danube, Dniester, Drin, Mekong, Meuse, Neman, Niger, Rhine, Sava, Senegal Rivers, the Amur/Argun/Daursky Biosphere Reserve and the Sahara and Sahel Observatory / Consultation Mechanism of the North Sahara Aquifer System.

Based on the experience from these and other basins, a collection of good practices and lessons learned on adaptation to climate change in transboundary basins has been prepared in 2014–2015 which includes more than 50 case studies from all over the world and is available at: <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=39417&L=0>

In addition, regular face-to-face meetings are held such as global workshops on the topic with interactive exercises.

WATER CONVENTION AND GROUNDWATER

The principles and provisions of the Water Convention address surface waters and groundwaters, including both confined and unconfined aquifers.

A number of soft-law instruments have been developed under the Water Convention to provide concrete guidance for and to facilitate the implementation of the Convention with regard to groundwater. For example, the 2012 Model Provisions on Transboundary Groundwaters are a tool to assist riparian countries to develop agreements or protocols to govern cooperation over their transboundary groundwaters. The Model Provisions reflect the lessons learned and experience gained in the implementation of the Convention and build on the 2008 draft Articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers developed by the United Nations International Law Commission. Specific guidance has also been developed under the Water Convention on monitoring and assessment of transboundary groundwaters (2000).

The Parties to the Convention cooperate closely with UNESCO with the shared objective to promote the protection and the reasonable, equitable and sustainable use of transboundary groundwaters, through the exchange of experience and the organization of joint activities.

WHO ARE THE CONVENTION'S PARTNERS?

A strong focus on countries – first of all, Parties to the Convention but also other States – and on inter-State cooperation is at heart of the Convention's activities. Cooperation with the existing river basin commissions and other institutions for transboundary water cooperation in specific basins is part of the day-to-day work.



The Parties to the Water Convention work in partnership with many international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and other actors in implementation of Convention's activities and to enhance the Convention's impact and efficiency.

Among others, these include all United Nations regional commissions, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank, the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Global Water Partnership (GWP), the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC), Regional Environmental Centres (RECs), Conservation International, Dundee University, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Green Cross International, the Stockholm Interna-

tional Water Institute (SIWI), Zoï Environment Network, the Alliance for Global Water Adaptation and many others. In particular, cooperation is established with regional organizations such as the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW), The African Network of Basin Organizations (ANBO), the European Commission, the European Environment Agency (EEA), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The Water Convention actively cooperates with the secretariats and governing bodies of other multilateral agreements, e.g. the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Alpine Convention and all UNECE multilateral environmental agreements. It also contributes to UN-Water activities, for example by co-chairing the UN-Water Thematic Priority Area on Transboundary Waters and by providing input to the United Nations World Water Development Reports.

The Parties to the Water Convention are committed to expanding partnerships for strengthening the implementation of the Convention and for broadening political support for transboundary water cooperation.

WHAT ARE THE OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE WATER CONVENTION?

The Water Convention has a three-pillar normative structure: (a) the due diligence obligation to prevent, control and reduce significant transboundary impact (“no-harm rule”); (b) the equitable and reasonable utilization principle; and (c) the principle of cooperation, as the catalyst for the realization of the prior two.

The due diligence nature of the obligation to prevent, control and reduce significant transboundary impact requires a Party to take “all appropriate measures” to implement the obligation. In the determination of “all appropriate measures”, consideration should be given to the level of economic development and technological, infrastructure and institutional capacity of a Party, as well as to the nature and degree of the risk of occurrence of transboundary impact in light of the specific circumstances and individual features of the relevant water basin.

The objectives of the Water Convention are to be achieved through a two-tiered approach, which envisages two main categories of obligations. The

first set of obligations, contained in Part I, are more general and apply to all Parties to the Convention. The second, contained in Part II, are more specific and must be implemented through the conclusion of further agreements by Riparian Parties sharing the same transboundary waters.

In order to facilitate implementation of the obligations under the Convention, the Guide to Implementing the Water Convention has been developed by the Convention’s Legal Board and adopted by the Meeting of the Parties in 2009. The Guide provides insights and explanations of both legal and technical aspects of the Convention’s requirements, as well as examples of their practical application.

DOES THE WATER CONVENTION FOLLOW INTERNATIONAL CUSTOMARY LAW?

The Water Convention is based on and fully in line with the international customary law. The Convention goes beyond international customary law by specifying and further developing the above key obligations. For example, the principle of cooperation is further detailed in the obligations to enter into specific agreements and establish joint

bodies, to hold consultations, to exchange information, to provide mutual assistance upon request, etc. Also, the Convention goes further than international customary law by providing an institutional mechanism for cooperation and standing out as intergovernmental platform for the day-to-day development of transboundary cooperation.

HOW DOES THE WATER CONVENTION RELATE TO THE 1997 UNITED NATIONS WATERCOURSES CONVENTION?

The globalization of the 1992 Water Convention is important vis-à-vis the entry into force of the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997 Watercourses Convention) in August 2014.

The two Conventions are fully compatible with no contradiction between them. A country can be a Party to both Conventions. In fact, many countries – Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Uzbekistan³ – are already Parties to both Conventions.

Moreover, the two Conventions are in many ways mutually complementary, e.g.:

- The 1997 Watercourses Convention complements the 1992 Water Convention including by detailing the factors relevant to equitable and reasonable utilization (Art. 6 of the 1997 Watercourses Convention), by providing the proce-

dures for consultations on planned measures (Part III of the 1997 Watercourses Convention) and by describing the consequences of the occurrence of transboundary impact (Art. 7(2) of the 1997 Watercourses Convention);

- The other way around, the 1992 Water Convention complements the 1997 Watercourses Convention including by prescribing the content of specific agreements and tasks of joint bodies (Art. 9 of the 1992 Water Convention), by detailing the information subject to joint assessment and exchange (Arts. 11 and 13 of the 1992 Water Convention) and by providing detailed guidance on the water quality objectives and best available technology (annexes to the 1992 Water Convention).



There are some differences between the two Conventions:

- The 1992 Water Convention obliges Riparian Parties to enter into agreements and establish joint bodies for their shared waters, whereas the 1997 Watercourses Convention only recommends watercourse States to conclude specific agreements and cooperate through joint institutions;
- The 1992 Water Convention also provides for the obligation to adapt existing watercourse agreements in line with the basic principles of the Convention, whereas there is no such requirement under the 1997 Watercourses Convention;
- The 1992 Water Convention establishes an institutional mechanism based on the Meeting of the Parties, whereas the 1997 Watercourses Convention does not provide for such a cooperation mechanism;
- Whereas the 1997 Watercourses Convention leaves confined groundwater outside its scope, the 1992 Water Convention covers all transboundary groundwater, including confined aquifers;
- The 1992 Water Convention allows limiting the exchange of information between Riparian Parties on the ground of intellectual property rights, whereas the 1997 Watercourses Convention does not allow such a limitation.

These differences are not, however, of a nature that would mean that implementation of one Conven-

tion would impede implementation of the other. As authoritatively stated by the United Nations International Law Commission, according to the principle of harmonization, when several norms bear on a single issue they should, to the extent possible, be interpreted so as to give rise to a single set of compatible obligations.⁴ The differences between the Conventions can therefore be reconciled by way of interpretation in order to reinforce and strengthen implementation of both instruments. Further guidance on the joint interpretation of the two Conventions can be found in *The Economic Commission for Europe Water Convention and the United Nations Watercourses Convention* (UNECE, 2015).

Moreover, being a Party to both Conventions allows a country to benefit from their strong legal frameworks and to advance the development and application of international water law by reinforcing the role of such law at the global level.

The United Nations Secretary-General and many countries and organizations have already called for the establishment of synergies in the implementation of the two Conventions.

The Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention (at its sixth session, 28-30 November 2012 and seventh session, 17-19 November 2015) has decided to promote synergies and coordination with the 1997 Watercourses Convention by sharing the experience collected under the Water Convention to support the implementation of the 1997 Watercourses Convention, promoting exchanges and coordination between the Parties to the two Conventions and offering an intergovernmental framework for discussion on the two Conventions.

“The globalization of the [Water] Convention should also go hand-in-hand with the [...] entry into force of the United Nations Watercourses Convention. These two instruments are based on the same principles. They complement each other and should be implemented in a coherent manner.”

– Message of Mr. Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General, to the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention, 28 November 2012

⁴“Fragmentation of International Law: Difficulties Arising from the Diversification and Expansion of International Law”, Report of the Study Group of the United Nations International Law Commission, 2006.

HOW CAN A COUNTRY JOIN THE 1992 WATER CONVENTION?

Any State that is a Member of the United Nations may accede to the Water Convention. The exact national process by which a State becomes a Party depends on that State's domestic legislation concerning the conclusion of treaties, which is often set out in that State's Constitution.



Preparations for the accession can be made by assessing the changes to the existing domestic legislation and to bilateral and multilateral agreements that the Convention requires. An effective approach is to establish an official working group to assess the impact of the Convention on domestic law and policies and on transboundary cooperation. If needed, a country can request assistance in the accession process from the Convention's Meeting of the Parties or secretariat.

For States outside the UNECE region, accession takes place on the basis of the Convention's articles 25 and 26 as amended and in force since 6 February 2013, and in conformity with the decision VI/3 of the Meeting of the Parties on accession by non-UNECE countries.

While the text of article 25, paragraph 3, allows the accession to the Water Convention by non-UNECE countries upon approval by the Meeting of the Parties, through its decision VI/3 the Meeting of the Parties gave blanket approval of any future request for accession to the Convention by United Nations Member States that are not members of UNECE. This approval contained in decision VI/3 is subject to the entry into force, for all the States and organizations that were Parties to the Convention on 28 November 2003, of the amendments to articles 25 and 26. Non-UNECE States are able to accede to the Convention since 1 March 2016. By effectively lifting the approval requirement, the Meeting of the Parties made the procedure of accession for non-UNECE member States the same as that for UNECE member States.

In order to become a Party, a State outside the UNECE region must deposit its instrument of accession with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, making reference to decision VI/3.

Accession to the Water Convention implies that a State becomes bound by the decisions of the Meeting of the Parties taken before the time of its accession. It does not imply accession to the Convention's protocols.⁵

⁵ The Water Convention has two Protocols: the 1999 Protocol on Water and Health and the 2003 Protocol on Civil Liability and Compensation for Damage Caused by the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents on Transboundary Waters.

THE GLOBAL OPENING of the 1992 Water Convention

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) was adopted in 1992 and entered into force in 1996. It brings together almost all countries sharing transboundary waters in the pan-European region, and is expected to achieve broader participation with its global opening to all United Nations Member States.

The Water Convention serves as a mechanism to strengthen international cooperation and national measures for the ecologically sound management and protection of transboundary surface waters and groundwaters. Furthermore, it provides an intergovernmental platform for the day-to-day development and advancement of transboundary cooperation.

The present publication explains the obligations under the Water Convention and the way in which its institutional platform works, as well as the advantages for States to become Party to the Water Convention. It also addresses the relationship between the Water Convention and the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses. The publication, which is intended for current and future Parties, international partners, non-governmental organizations and academia, aims to strengthen the understanding of the Water Convention and its global opening to all United Nations Member States.

Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes
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