

7th Environment for Europe, Ministerial Conference, Astana
Plenary Key Note Speech on Water and Water related Eco-systems
Sascha Gabizon, European Eco-Forum
Thursday 22 of September, morning plenary session

Thank you excellency, dear delegates,

My name is SG, I am executive director of WECF, and currently co-chair of the European Eco forum of environmental NGOs

It is an honour and a great pleasure to be here at the 7th EfE ministerial conference, in this nice city of Astana. The only 'shadow' over this city, is that asbestos continues to be the main building material – a material which kills 100.000 people each year.

The greatest challenges of water management problems which our region faces are threefold:

1. **Bad management of water resources in the transboundary context**
2. **Deteriorating of rural water supply and sanitation**
3. **Mining pollution of our waters**

1. We still do not have effective transboundary river and aquifer basin agreements in most of the EECCA part of the region. Of course there are one or two good highlights, like the Chu-Talas basin cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Dniester agreement is almost ready for signing, as we heard before, and we encourage all governments to quickly move forward. So far the good news. The most striking example of bad basin management remains the dying of the Aral Sea. 20 years have past, and the root problem of the Aral Sea shrinking has not been solved. We have thrown away the livelihoods - and the health - of a million people in Karakalpakstan. Only because of bad irrigation practices. Why, has it not been possible to move to in 20 years to widescale efficient irrigation?

- We therefore call on governments to develop and implement national water strategies resulting from their National Policy Dialogues and in line with the EU water framework directive, with its effective public participation.
- We call on all governments who have not yet done so to ratify the transboundary water convention and to sign transboundary river agreements for all basins by 2015

- We call for concrete targets for fast reduction of all inefficiently irrigated areas in Central Asia, we have no time to loose!

2. Deteriorating rural water supply and sanitation

Rural populations in the UNECE region are suffering health damage from lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation. For years now, the WHO has not revised its figures that some 120 - 145 million people live without access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Most of them live in rural areas. An epidemiological study from a WHO collaborative center, show that in the village studied, here in Central Asia, children under age 2 have the highest diarrheal diseases burden, at least 8 times a year they have diphteria, - which is almost every month - most survive, but they are weakened and their development has slowed. The main cause of this fecal-oral disease transmission are unsafe excreta disposal, unsafe drinking water, and unsafe water storage. These diseases are entirely avoidable, this suffering is entirely unnecessary. Unfortunately the situation in many rural areas in the Eastern part of the region seems to have deteriorated in the last 20 years. At the same time, many NGOs and local entrepreneurs have shown that affordable and successful solutions exist.

We therefore call on governments to

- ratify the protocol on water and health, if not yet done, and prioritize its implementation.
- Adopt of guidelines for small scale water supply and sanitation as are being developed under the Protocol for Water and Health, into national legislation
- Allocate of at least 50% of the EBRD water fund to invest in achieving access to water and sanitation in rural communities with less then 5,000 people
- And cooperate with local NGOs who are effective in demonstration and education

I have kept the worst of all problems for last.

3. Mining pollution of waters

Among others thanks to the work by the Environmental Security Programme of UNEP, NATO etc, we are now informed of the immense risk of **irreversible pollution** of transboundary groundwater in the UNECE region from mining.

It is of UTMOST urgency that we halt the leaking of radio-nuclides from the old Soviet-time uranium mining tailings in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, into the groundwater. This pollution is irreversible – you cannot filter the radioactivity out once it is in. And it's threatening all the countries in Central Asia.

We know that it is costly, an estimated 50 million euro are needed now to start with the most urgent pollution in Kyrgyzstan. We know that the clean up of the relative small Wismut uranium mine tailing in Germany are costing up to 7 billion euro instead of the 800 million it was supposed to be.

At the same time, we stand here in Kazakhstan, and we hear that the country is becoming the biggest exporter of uranium, amongst others to the EU. But are the EU companies paying the full cost of clean up and containment in the price of uranium it's buying? Who is paying for the real cost?

In all UNECE countries we are facing serious pollution from mining. Bulgaria's ministry of Environment issued a permit this week for a highly controversial gold mine by Canadians, near Krumovgrad, with serious risks of cyanide pollution - public participation in the decision was not allowed. That cyanide accidents happen, we know from experience in Romania. The gold mine on the shores of the Lake Sevan drinking water reservoir in Armenia is another major threat. But also the Kali salt mines in Belarus are a great source of pollution.

At the last UN CSD19 in New York in May this year, governments negotiated very successfully on agreements on mining, but unfortunately we lost the entire text as other chapters did not get approval.

This is clearly a gap in policy where the Environment for Europe process should focus on, as it was mandated to do in the Future of the process decision. It can build on the work done at CSD19.

We therefore call for a mandate for UNECE together with other UN sister organisations such as UNEP, to start working in the framework of EfE on urgent solutions to this mining pollution of waters.

I thank you for your attention