

WECF SUBMISSIONS to the HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – UPR 9th Session: The Situation of Water and Sanitation in Bulgaria

Many human rights cannot be enjoyed without water. The *right to life* is one of the fundamental concepts involving water directly (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The *right to food* is a central right linked to water safety and access to water (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ICESCR). The *right to self-determination* includes "the right of people to manage their own resources" and thus water (General Comment No. 12 to the ICESCR). Furthermore, the *right to an adequate standard of living* implies the secure access to water sources (ICESCR). The *right to housing* states "the right to adequate housing should have sustainable access to natural and common resources, safe drinking water (...) sanitation and washing facilities" (General Comment No. 4 to the ICESCR). Finally, the *right to education* cannot be realised in some regions due to the fact that many children are forced to spend long hours walking to a water source and bringing water home (Universal Declaration to Human Rights). 30 years ago Bulgaria ratified the ICESCR, but still there are significant flaws when looking at the present situation of access to water and sanitation in the country.

Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) is a network of about 100 women's and environmental organisations in 40 countries. Our network spans Western Europe and the EECCA region (Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia). The network strives for a healthy environment for all. WECF's activities are based in its partners' own visions and needs. Therefore, WECF implements solutions locally and influences policy internationally. One of WECF's key objectives is safe water and sustainable sanitation for all. Even in the European Union, more than 20 million citizens still lack safe sanitation.

Bulgaria's Rural Infrastructure

Bulgaria consists of 261 rural municipalities with 3.2 million people in approximately 4,000 villages and 200 small towns. This makes about 1.8 million rural inhabitants (42% of its population) living in 81% of the territory of Bulgaria. The average size of population in a village is 540, in a small town 7,500. Every settlement with less than 30,000 inhabitants is considered a "rural settlement".

The quality of the technical infrastructure in rural areas has deteriorated significantly due to under-investments in infrastructure development and maintenance. This results in deterioration of the quality of life and threatens the ability of rural areas to maintain population and attract investments.

The *water provision infrastructure* of the country serves 98% of the total population. The larger part of the network (88%) was built in the 1960-1980s and due to poor maintenance frequent breakdowns occur. Furthermore, the operation efficiency is low and large water losses occur due to leakages.

However, the major problems of the settlements in rural areas are associated with *sewerage treatment systems* and waste collection, which is missing in 70% of the villages. This has a negative impact on the quality of life in and the environment of rural areas. The under-development of the sewerage systems pose a significant challenge to rural villages. Only 2.1% of the villages have sewage systems as compared to 70.5% of the towns. Only 400 km

of the entire sewerage system are located in villages and serve them. The number of the settlements with built sewerage infrastructure is less than 300 (167 towns and 105 villages).

Drinking Water Supply

According to official data 97% of the rural areas are supplied with drinking water. The water is of good quality, although interruptions are observed. During summer time in some villages water runs only one time per day for several hours. The water sources are partly protected, partly not. Chlorinated water is the rule, thus people prefer bottled water to water from the tap. 5 litres cost 2 BGL (around 1€).

The pipes of the rural water supply systems are of bad quality, rusted and containing leakages, therefore losses along the pipes are often, but no data exist to what extent water is lost.

Rural people often own wells in their yards, but they do not use them for drinking purposes. They irrigate their gardens and use the water for their animals. WECF found that the water of these wells is often polluted with nitrates, as well as are the open sources, such as rivers, springs, etc. The values of the pollution differ from 30-50 to 200 mg nitrate/l, depending on the position of the well. Sometimes pit latrines are very close to the wells which is a main reason for the pollution of the source of water. There are regions where the water is rusty, tasting bad and having a yellow or light brown colour.

Bulgaria is one of the countries in European Union being already affected by climate change. Increased drought periods and higher temperatures are observed, hence groundwater levels are decreasing.

The Sanitation Situation

In villages with less than 2,000 inhabitants there is no wastewater management. People have indoor or outdoor toilets which end in not sealed pit latrines which infiltrate in the ground. Sometimes due to a high water table pit latrines overflow streets. Depending on the geological structure wastewater from pit latrines either infiltrates in the ground and does not need any emptying, or people empty the pit latrine by truck in order not cause an overflow. A truck costs between 100 to 140 BGL (around 50-70€) for emptying the wastewater once which is often sufficient for a one-family household per year.

The Environment Operational Programme in Bulgaria is funded with 1.395 million Euros from the EU Cohesion Fund. Bulgaria has to build, until 2015, 427 properly working wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) to meet the requirements of the EU Urban Wastewater Directive (91/271/EEC). Settlements with less than 2,000 inhabitants are not included. With the current levels of funds, priority is given to the wastewater treatment plants of large municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants and smaller municipalities on the Black Sea coast (due to regular faecal pollution of the shore and the adjacent areas). There are no funds for small agglomerations. Another problem is that many wastewater treatment plants in urban areas have been overestimated and do not work according to their capacity and according to the number of the population which they are meant to serve.

Bulgaria faces a huge challenge in carrying out its obligations which were promised to the EU in terms of reforming and improving its institutions and infrastructure according to the EU Directives for the period 2007-2013.

In Bulgaria, there are 5,000 towns and villages with less than 2,000 inhabitants and only 2.1% of all the rural villages have access to centralised sewage system (not treatment). Therefore, a total number of 1,867,139 million people, or 25% of the population, are currently most in need of improved sanitation. This is one of the main problem related to water and sanitation within Bulgaria.