Hydrometeorological records and climate projections provide abundant evidence that water resources are vulnerable and can be strongly affected by climate change, with wide-ranging consequences for human societies and ecosystems. Nevertheless, very few countries have developed adaptation strategies so far. The fact that many water bodies cross boundaries, especially in the UNECE region, means that risks and challenges are shared and that solutions therefore need to be coordinated. Transboundary cooperation in developing adaptation strategies is currently, however, almost non-existent.

Recognizing the urgency of the issue, at its fourth session in November 2006 in Bonn, Germany, the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) decided to develop the present Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change. Work on the Guidance was carried out under the Convention’s Task Force on Water and Climate, jointly led by the Netherlands and Germany, in cooperation with the Task Force on Extreme Weather Events under the Protocol on Water and Health, led by Italy. The Guidance has a special focus on transboundary issues and health aspects and includes numerous case studies. It is intended to guide Parties and non-Parties to the Convention and to the Protocol on Water and Health in the implementation of the Convention’s and Protocol’s provisions in the context of climate change.

The Guidance is based on experience and good practices in the UNECE region. Its preparation relied on a broad consultative process, involving national authorities, academia, NGOs and international organizations. A drafting group with multidisciplinary competences and an extensive expert review were decisive in its development. Its drafting was also informed by a survey conducted in countries with economies in transition, which explored adaptation needs and measures already undertaken, and by the findings of the international workshop on “Water and Adaptation to Climate Change: Joining Efforts to Adapt” (Amsterdam, 1–2 July 2008), organized by the Governments of the Netherlands, Germany and Italy in cooperation with UNECE and the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. The Amsterdam workshop allowed for sharing experiences related to the benefits of and mechanisms for transboundary cooperation in adaptation activities, as well as institutional, policy, legal, scientific and financial aspects of adaptation in water management and water depending sectors, including cross-cutting issues such as education. The Guidance benefited from and inspired the work done at the level of the European Union that started under the German presidency in 2007 and culminated with the publication of the White Paper “Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action” in April 2009 and the preparation of the guidance document “River basin management in a changing climate” developed under the Common Implementation Strategy of the EU Water Framework Directive.

However, existing experience with climate change adaptation in the transboundary context is still very limited. As climate change adaptation is a new and uncertain process, practice is needed to advance our knowledge. This Guidance should be seen as a first step in a long-term process. By adopting it, the Parties to the Water Convention commit to its implementation at all levels. An important next step will be the practical actions that will be based on the Guidance. The lessons learned, good practices and experience that will come from implementing the Guidance and promoting climate change adaptation in transboundary basins will help extend our knowledge base and improve our ability to cope with current and future climate change. Exchanging such experience with climate change adaptation is crucial to enhancing the adaptive capacity of countries both within the UNECE region and beyond. The Convention will continue to be an important platform for sharing experience at the pan-European level and for building cooperation on one of the key issues facing the region.