

Statement by Mr. Sven Alkalaj
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at
The 20th Anniversary event of the Water Convention

3-4 September 2012, Helsinki, Finland

20 years of water cooperation in the pan-European region: lessons for the forthcoming globalization of the UNECE Water Convention

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to warmly thank the Government of Finland and more specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry for organizing this joyful event.

Since it was here in Helsinki that the UNECE Water Convention was negotiated and signed 20 years ago, it is indeed most appropriate that we have gathered here to celebrate the occasion.

And there are many achievements of the past 20 years that deserve to be celebrated.

Achievements and strengths

First and foremost, the Convention has made a great difference on the ground. It has been a key driver for continuous progress on transboundary water cooperation throughout the region, making it the most advanced in this respect worldwide.

The Convention has fostered the development of transboundary agreements, the establishment of joint bodies and the strengthening of cooperation at both the political and technical levels.

This has happened in very diverse circumstances, including in the context of economic transition and political tensions. As a strong testimony of this is the Convention's influence after the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in helping countries in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia to draw up agreements regulating waters, which the creation of new international boundaries had made transboundary. The Convention has been an important reference and support for mutual trust building efforts. I can personally testify to this through my own experience in the development of cooperation in the Sava River Basin.

The evolution of cooperation on water issues in the Balkans as well as in other areas with a delicate political context demonstrates that we should not shy away from challenges.

And this is certainly another key to the success of the work under the Convention: Parties did not shy away from challenges and thorny issues. On the contrary, they have united their forces to collectively address common problems as well as specific difficulties in some parts of the region.

There is much evidence of this: the continuously growing focus on implementation, with special attention to countries with economies in transition; the capacity to start pioneering work on complex issues, such as ecosystems services or adaptation to climate change in the transboundary context; as well as the critical scrutiny of implementation and trends through regular assessments.

The upcoming session of the Meeting of the Parties will once again demonstrate such an innovative and strategic approach. The establishment of the Implementation Committee will offer a very much needed mechanism for conflict prevention and resolution that will further enhance the impact of the Convention and its normative authority in the UNECE region and beyond.

The capacity of the work under the Convention to evolve and respond to trends and countries' needs has kept it relevant throughout the years, with a preserved inspirational value. Such capacity derives from the high-level of ownership, involvement and contributions by countries to the Convention's work. Without this, the Convention might have not survived the spectacular changes since 1992.

In this period, the pan-European region has gone through profound political, economic and social transformation. In 1992, UNECE counted 43 members compared to 56 today, and the European Union counted 12 members compared to 27 today. The world's population has increased from 5.48 billion to 7 billion. And there are not only more of us, but we also consume increasingly more: from 1992 until 2008, per-person energy consumption increased at a rate of 5 per cent annually. To meet the demands of a growing population with increasing wealth and consumption levels, global water withdrawals have tripled over the last 50 years.

Future challenges

These trends will further accelerate. The world's population is predicted to grow to 8.3 billion in 2030 and to 9.1 billion in 2050. Unless there are significant changes to the ways that we produce and consume, agricultural production will have to increase by about 70% by 2050, and about 50% more primary energy will have to be made available by 2035. Such increases will have far-reaching implications for water resources. Indeed, water demands are projected to reach planetary boundaries in the coming decades.

In such a complex world, transboundary water cooperation will be more and more vital to avoid conflicts and ensure effective and sustainable use of shared resources. It is not just water (physically) that countries need to agree about; it is the diverse benefits that accrue from using water resources and the services that they provide that need to be considered and shared equitably. This is where the experience and the intergovernmental platform of the Water Convention are needed.

The future of the Convention: its globalization

Therefore today's event should not only be an occasion to celebrate the past but also an important moment to lay the foundations for the future. How do you want the Convention, its work and its role to evolve in the next 20 years in order to respond to such challenges? What achievements do you want to be able to celebrate in 2032 and what issues will you need to address to that end?

From my point of view, the future of the Convention will be defined by its globalization and opening up to countries outside the UNECE region. This will certainly be a gradual process – it will not happen overnight that the Convention assumes a truly global membership. But this process starts now and your vision on how to shape it as of today is crucial, especially as many non-ECE countries have already expressed an interest in the Convention.

While the Rio+20 Conference was a great success in terms of recognition of the importance of water for the three pillars of sustainable development, the political message of the Conference on transboundary water cooperation was weaker - and certainly not because the issue is minor or of no

consequence. This shows the need for a global platform to further the political and technical debate on transboundary water issues and the Convention can offer such a platform.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to share with you some considerations, building on the lessons from the last 20 years, which could be of guidance for the future.

Key lessons for the way ahead

The approach with regard to non-UNECE countries should be consistent with how the Convention and its Parties have behaved so far towards non-Parties in the UNECE region. It has been an inclusive and engaging approach, involving non-Parties in the work almost as much as Parties. This openness and cooperative spirit has brought tremendous results, not only in terms of increased membership but also in terms of strengthening the capacity of non-Parties. In this manner, cooperation at the basin level and management of resources have improved throughout the region.

Indeed, by opening up to non-UNECE countries, the Convention can continue to offer a platform for exchange and for learning from each other, as it did in the 1990s between old and new EU members and later between the western and the eastern parts of the region. The eagerness of Parties and non-Parties to make available their direct experience of implementation is - and hopefully will continue to be - an invaluable strength.

Another important aspect for the future will be the relationship with the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention which is expected to enter into force in 2013 or 2104. The consequences of the entry into force of the 1997 Convention in terms of implementation and intergovernmental structure are to be seen and the results cannot be anticipated. At the same time, it is critical that future scenarios build on synergies, and avoid duplication and the waste of resources. The similarities and complementarity of the two Conventions should be built upon through exchanges and coordination between their Parties. This event provides another opportunity to discuss this issue and I would again like to thank Finland and other Parties to both Conventions for encouraging this dialogue.

A common challenge for both the 1997 Watercourses Convention and the UNECE Water Convention is their lack of visibility and the persisting misinterpretations by some of their obligations. This is an important issue that needs to be tackled, not least to avoid the possible political twisting of their spirit and to counter attempts to instigate a dangerous competition among them. Future efforts to build capacity on the two tools at the same time will be an important step in the right direction and I welcome partners' efforts to this end.

Let me also devote a few words to partners, such as other international organizations and NGOs, whose role has been tremendous in the past 20 years. Only thanks to partners has it been possible to mobilize the support needed for the Convention's implementation. In the future, partnerships will become even more fundamental. It is therefore key that more and more partners realize the usefulness of the Convention for their activities and take advantage of it. Indeed, the Convention and its intergovernmental framework offer a valuable basis for many actors in the field of transboundary water cooperation at the global level. It can strengthen the mandate for their work and provide a platform for the exchange and the assessment of results, coordination of activities and benchmarking of progress. The Convention's Parties, Bureau and secretariat should be proactive in establishing such partnerships.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that transboundary water cooperation is and will remain an eminently political issue. Hence the political role of Parties should not be underestimated. The positive results elicited by recent diplomatic initiatives by a number of countries at both global and bilateral levels show that there are opportunities for further efforts in the UNECE region and

beyond. Parties have a special role and responsibility to support cooperation. I therefore encourage you to use all the more your political leverage to move cooperation forward.

An important way of doing this is through development assistance and it is very positive that support for transboundary water cooperation is among the priorities for international assistance in many countries. A desirable development in this regard is that Parties to the Convention further link their development assistance to the Convention's application and implementation. There are already many positive examples of such an approach. As we are here in Helsinki, let me cite the Wider Europe Initiative (WEI), a development policy framework programme covering Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia launched in 2009 by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The overarching objectives of the Wider Europe Initiative include regional conflict prevention, support for peace processes, and environmental cooperation. These objectives and the fact that the initiative has an important water component have created a particularly fruitful synergy with the Water Convention, with a substantial impact on the ground. From both the donors' and the recipients' perspective, linking assistance to a long-term process offers the advantage of enhancing sustainability. Therefore similar arrangements should be further promoted.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by underscoring that as the globalization of the Convention is key to its future evolution, it is important that the Meeting of the Parties in Rome in November gives a strong and clear message to non-UNECE countries and to partners. Part of this clear message regards the need for the prompt ratification of the amendments by those Parties which have not yet done so. And I would like to take today's occasion to urge them once more to speed up their ratification process. At the same time, I am very pleased that almost all Parties have made progress in this area and that the amendments are expected to enter into force by the end of the year. I am also very pleased to know that the preparations for the Meeting of the Parties have devoted great attention to the issue of the opening up of the Convention and I can only encourage you to continue to be bold, far-sighted and ambitious, as you have been in the past 20 years.

Thank you for your attention.