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Statement

by

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at

COP26 Water Action Event: “Thirsty for change: the goals of the Paris Agreement are within reach by tapping the potential of water”

Friday, 5 November, 12:10-12:35

Global Climate Action arena, Glasgow, UK

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to speak. I would like to make three main points:

- Water is crucial for climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- Water bears an enormous potential for cooperation. Transboundary cooperation makes adaptation more effective.
- However, transboundary cooperation is largely insufficient so far and many more resilient operational arrangements for cooperation are needed.

Most climate change impacts are transmitted through water, triggering glacial melting, floods, sea-level rise. Water resources are under unprecedented threat.

This year, the world has witnessed devastating floods and droughts. Their frequency and severity increases, along with water stress and scarcity. Combined with population pressures and economic growth, this can intensify tensions over water and make water-stressed regions more prone to conflict.

Despite this bad news, I also see hope.

Water bears an enormous potential for cooperation. Water is crucial for climate change adaptation and mitigation. To achieve the Paris Agreement, we must mainstream water - as highlighted by the UN-Water policy brief on climate change and water. Water should be a central element in the nationally determined contributions and adaptation strategies of any country.

More than 60% of the world's freshwater is shared by two or more countries. Three-quarters of United Nations Member States share basins with a neighboring country. Many of the world's largest rivers are transboundary, for example the Nile, the Congo, the Amazon, and the Mekong.

Transboundary cooperation is crucial to address climate change impacts, conserve ecosystems, oceans and improve water quality. Both water and climate change do not know borders. **Transboundary cooperation in climate change adaptation prevents maladaptation and makes adaptation more effective** by sharing data, enlarging the planning space and sharing costs and benefits. The basin and transboundary dimension should be considered by cities, businesses and all water managers.

In many basins, the need to jointly address droughts and floods was at the origin of transboundary cooperation, such as in the Senegal River. Basin organizations are increasingly, but not yet sufficiently addressing climate change: transboundary adaptation strategies have been developed for example in the Danube, Rhine, Lake Victoria, Mekong, Dniester and Neman basins. Today, the Mekong River Commission will introduce its adaptation activities, demonstrating the important work of Basin Organizations as “agents for peace”.

Transboundary water agreements create the legal and institutional frameworks that help to manage shared basins across political borders. **Water treaties promote peace and sustainable development and reduce the risk of conflicts over scarce resources, by providing procedural and substantive norms, thus reducing uncertainty.** They provide an enabling environment for investments. Monitoring their progress through SDG indicator 6.5.2 on transboundary water cooperation is thus very important.

However, as the second reporting on the indicator carried out by UNESCO and UNECE as custodian agencies in 2020-2021 has shown, **the world is not on track:**

Worldwide only 24 out of the 153 countries sharing transboundary waters have all their transboundary waters covered by operational agreements for water cooperation. This number would need to increase by nearly 15 every year to achieve the target until 2030. Progress is urgently required to ensure that all water-sharing countries cooperate effectively, fight climate change jointly and ensure sustainable peace.

In addition, only 43% of the reported transboundary agreements cover climate adaptation. Several countries have noted the need to update their agreements to include climate change.

The Water Convention, serviced by UNECE, provides a crucial legal framework and intergovernmental platform for adapting shared water resources to climate change. Currently counting 46 Parties, including 5 from Africa, more than 130 countries participate. The Convention acts as a catalyst for negotiating new, and strengthening existing, transboundary agreements and

institutions, as well as for improving national water governance.

The Convention and its Task Force on Water and Climate support countries in developing transboundary adaptation strategies and implementing agreed adaptation measures through guidance, projects on the ground and exchange of experience. One example is the global network of basins working on climate change, coordinated by UNECE and the International Network of Basin Organizations. I invite new basins to join the network.

I now look forward to hearing from two examples from the ground: the NGO EcoPeace from Middle East working in a basin with less advanced cooperation, and the Mekong River Commission from Asia, with advanced cooperation.

The floor is yours.

Second part- closing statement:

Thank you for those inspiring examples of how to promote cooperation. There are many examples from other basins: The Niger basin authority has recently secured the first transboundary project from the Green Climate Fund. Working groups on climate change have been established in the Chu Talas and Lake Titicaca basins. **These activities increase resilience, support national and local adaptation and can help coordinate member countries measures.**

Examples from other basins will be presented during the cooperation day at the Water and Climate Pavilion, on 12 November.

Let me conclude with some reflections on how to accelerate water treaties for increased resilience.

We need to increase political will, upscale capacity development and address data gaps, especially on groundwater, as well as leverage and mobilize expertise. I call on the many actors present here and online to contribute- governments, private sector, NGOs and academia.

As we heard, civil society should unite across borders and promote local or

technical cooperation, especially when political progress on water treaties is difficult. NGOs should play a more active role in water cooperation.

Since lack of funding is a major challenge also for many basin organizations **I call on international financial institutions, the private sector, climate funds and others to recognize and invest in transboundary climate change adaptation.** Innovative financing mechanisms engaging public and private sectors, such as the Blue Peace Financing Initiative, social impact bonds, and the development of basin investment plans can help to address bottlenecks in financing and raise needed resources.

UNECE and UNESCO, together with partners, will continue to support countries to develop and operationalize transboundary arrangements in the framework of the SDG 6 global acceleration framework.

The Water Convention will further build capacity and spur actions on climate, also on new priorities such as supporting countries in cooperating on NDCs and in financing transboundary climate change adaptation. We will even more break siloes, with water-using sectors such as energy and agriculture, following the nexus approach, bridging adaptation and mitigation.

COP26 is the COP for action. Water is crucial for climate action and carries a strong potential for cooperation – let us jointly use this enormous potential.

The 2023 United Nations water conference as well as future COPs provide crucial milestones. I look forward to your engagement.

Thank you.
