

Contribution to the Webinar ‘Geneva environnement dialogues’: The value of transboundary water cooperation and the Water Convention in the time of COVID-19

I would first like to thank the organizers of this seminar, more specifically the UNECE, for kindly inviting the Senegalese party to provide its oral contribution.

I also wish everyone good health.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, an initiative like this one that allows the sharing of experience and relevant thoughts for the community is most welcome.

Yes, I will say at the outset that this pandemic has shaken humanity and that it has shaken our environment. Under these circumstances, one of the current relevant thoughts concerns the value of transboundary water cooperation and the Water Convention.

Taking my own country, Senegal, as an example, transboundary water cooperation is essential. This Sahelian country is situated in the most western part of Africa and shares most of its surface water and groundwater resources with its neighbors. Prevailing drought in this region in the 1970s, led our country to strengthen its cooperation with neighboring countries through the establishment of basin organizations in order to adapt to this situation, in particular the Senegal River Development Organization (OMVS) and the Gambia River Development Organization (OMVG). These basin organizations play a critical role in the development and resilience of their member countries’ socio-economic activities.

Their contribution in a pandemic context is as justified as it is in a drought context.

When the member countries of our basin organizations (OMVS and OMVG) were affected by COVID-19, each country took measures according to the virus progression and the internal strategy adopted. Movement restriction and social distancing measures have stunted the operation of these organizations. However, activities have been maintained through teleworking as some meetings are held through videoconferencing. Field activities are also maintained upon authorization of the States and carried out in compliance with the prescribed health measures.

Therefore, as things stand currently, these countries are in the vanguard of managing the crisis. Basin organizations participate in the crisis effort by adapting to the measures prescribed by national authorities while also providing financial support, for instance, to the national funds for combating COVID-19.

However, this matter also needs to be addressed in the medium and long term. The Water Convention's contribution in this respect is very meaningful and deserves to be highlighted. Through its activities and tools, the Water Convention provides opportunities to develop our shared basins in order to strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerabilities while maximizing potential benefits. It thereupon provides a relevant framework under the United Nations for the sustainable use of transboundary water resources and to prevent water-use related conflicts through the creation of cooperation frameworks adapted to each basin or enhancing existing ones.

However, measures adopted by the States to address the current COVID-19 crisis could increase pressure on transboundary water resources. Additionally, this crisis could induce tensions and local conflicts, migrations etc. Therefore, the Water Convention could help countries by creating or building the capacity of existing institutional mechanisms. Support can be provided on various aspects of these resources' management, including aspects related to water quantity or quality, which are very important to consider in the event of a health crisis affecting access to water and sanitation.

Furthermore, COVID-19 gives rise to new challenges regarding the exchange of information and monitoring of transboundary watercourses, as it becomes more important to provide water timely, and in sufficient quantities and quality, which requires monitoring to be compliant to standards. In this regard, upon its accession to the Water Convention, Senegal made water resources monitoring and assessment one of its priorities. Senegal has also submitted its application and, together with Finland, is vice-chairing the Working Group on Water Resources Monitoring and Assessment for the period 2019-2020.

With the support of the Water Convention, both the OMVS and OMVG could therefore develop resilient actions and tools in the current COVID-19 context. In agreement with donors, some ongoing projects could be restructured to better address some emergencies and/or extend their

deadlines, for instance, the Integrated Water Resources Management Project in the Senegal River Basin could benefit from being restructured or prolonged.

It will also be necessary to strengthen cooperation in order to further expand development projects with the aim of reducing food insecurity and eradicating inaccessibility to basic services, in particular access to water and sanitation services. Inadequacies hampering development in our two basins also need to be addressed and enabling frameworks to increase the benefits of cooperation should be established. For instance, the legal framework of the Gambia River Basin needs to be completed through the development of a Water Charter similar to the Water Charter of the Senegal River Basin. The Water Charter for the Gambia River Basin could include health elements and health cooperation in order to strengthen the organization's capacity to support States in preventing and managing health crisis situations similar to the one we are experiencing.

In short, the COVID-19 situation reminds us of the importance of strengthening cooperation to prevent and address situations like the one we are currently facing and that the field of water is not exempted. The Convention can play a crucial role in this respect by supporting States sharing transboundary water resources.

Thank you for your attention,

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