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Statement

by

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at

Seventh Workshop on Adaptation to Climate Change in Transboundary Basins:

Ecosystem-based Adaptation in Transboundary Basins

Geneva, 29 April 2019

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to address you today on the occasion of the global workshop on ecosystem-based adaptation in transboundary basins, organized under the auspices of the Water Convention in partnership with several key organizations working in this field.

Recent weeks and months have once again shown that most disasters and climate change impacts are felt through the water cycle- and are thereby significantly affecting other sectors. In the period 1998-2017, 91% of all disaster were caused by floods, storms, wildfires, droughts, and other extreme weather events - in other words related to the water cycle. Severe flooding recently caused large numbers of casualties and damage to homes and infrastructure in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Parts of Europe are still suffering from the effects of the 2018 drought which caused forest fires and lower harvest, resulting in significant economic losses for farmers. In recent years, floods, droughts and climate variability were among the leading causes of acute food crisis affecting 59 million people in 24 countries in Africa alone.

This should be a call for action to work on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. While concerted efforts for a substantial reduction in greenhouse gas emissions are crucial, we also need develop ways to adapt to the unavoidable consequences of climate change. Ecosystem services have been recognized as an integral part of climate change adaptation strategies as they can deliver benefits that increase people's resilience.

Ecosystem management offers a means to address the challenges posed by climate change while simultaneously delivering many vital benefits to the environment, human health and livelihoods, and food and energy security. The ecosystem approach has been promoted for some time in multilateral environmental agreements, including the Ramsar Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity and also the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

According to the Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction adopted in 2015, sustainable ecosystem management is key for resilience. The World Water Day and World Water Development Report 2018 were therefore dedicated to Nature-based Solutions.

Adopting ecosystem-based approaches are also central to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal Target 6.6. explicitly requests countries to protect and restore water-related ecosystems. Ecosystem-based adaptation is also mentioned in SDG targets 2.4 on sustainable food production, goal 11 on sustainable settlements, goal 13 on combating climate change and targets 15.1 and 15.4 on sustainable forests and halting biodiversity loss.

Given the many threats to global water supply, forest management and planning will increasingly need to deploy strategies for optimizing watershed services – such as water purification, the regulation of surface flows, and erosion control. The services provided by forest ecosystems for water quality are largely underestimated. The joint UNECE and FAO study “Forests and Water – Valuation and payments for forest ecosystem services” showcases how payments for ecosystem services schemes can be applied to forests, in particular focusing on forest’s hydrological functions for the mutual benefit of both humans and the environment.

Unfortunately, many of the vital ecosystem services are jeopardized by severe environmental degradation. The United Nations General Assembly has therefore recently declared 2021-2030 as the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. It aims, among others, to restore over 2 billion hectares of degraded forests, wetlands and other ecosystems in order to reduce effects of climate change and enhance food security, water supply and biodiversity. As an example, in 2018, UNECE organized jointly with FAO and IUCN a Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration and the Bonn Challenge for the Caucasus and Central Asia. The meeting resulted in pledges of six countries to restore over 2.5 million hectares of forest landscape by 2030.

As an additional challenge, more than 60 per cent of the global freshwater flow is occurring in transboundary basins. Transboundary water cooperation is therefore essential for climate change adaptation, including ecosystem-based adaptation. Ecosystem-based adaptation is particularly relevant in transboundary basins since it is usually beneficial from a basin perspective as the downstream effects of such measures are relatively small and/or advantageous. Transboundary cooperation in adaptation can make it more effective by locating measures where they have the optimum effect. Application of ecosystem-based

measures can even help to initiate or strengthen transboundary cooperation between countries more broadly- and may sometimes contribute to regional integration, peace and prevention of conflicts.

In this regard, we have an important legal and intergovernmental framework at hand serviced by UNECE: The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) requires conservation and restoration of ecosystems at the national and transboundary level, including the ecosystem approach. This is to be achieved, for example, by setting water quality criteria and objectives, implementing measures for improving water quality and preventing pollution.

Concrete activities on ecosystems to help countries implement these obligations were initiated in the early 2000s by organizing workshops to exchange experience and preparing publications on the role of water-related ecosystems, ecosystem services and financing ecosystem conservation. In 2006, *Recommendations on Payments for Ecosystem Services in Integrated Water Resources Management* were prepared and adopted by the Meeting of the Parties. Most recently, the *Words into Action - Implementation Guide for Addressing Water-Related Disasters and Transboundary Cooperation*, which was published in 2018 by UNECE and UNISDR, promotes ecosystem-based adaptation in disaster risk reduction.

The Water Convention also addresses ecosystem-based adaptation through its Task Force on Water and Climate as well as the Global Network of basins working on climate change adaptation. In the pilot basins, ecosystem-based adaptation was included into transboundary climate change impact and vulnerability assessments, basin adaptation strategies and some small-scale EbA measures were implemented on the ground

The Water Convention turned into a global framework for transboundary water management in 2016. Chad and Senegal acceded in 2018 to the Convention and more than 15 other countries have started the accession process. This may help to protect and restore ecosystems at national and basin level. I encourage all countries to join the Water Convention and support it, as also done by the United Nations Secretary-General.

The present global workshop on ecosystem-based approaches and measures to adapt to climate change with participants from all continent, including Australia, is the best proof of the benefits of such a global Convention. The workshop is organized in collaboration with the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO), the Alliance for Global Water Adaptation (AGWA), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). I would like to sincerely thank the partners of the workshop for their collaboration and partnership.

I would also like to thank the lead countries and donors without which the work on climate change under the Water Convention would not be possible, namely the Netherlands and Switzerland.

However, work should not stop with this workshop: upcoming events such as the Climate Action Summit in September and the World Water Day in 2020 focused on water and climate provide concrete opportunities for bringing forward the results at global and national level. Ecosystem-based adaptation and transboundary cooperation can also be included in the revised Nationally Determined Contributions in 2020. Such opportunities will be discussed at the tenth meeting of the Water Convention's Task Force on Water and Climate on Wednesday.

I wish that each of you will return home with new ideas and inspiration on how to implement ecosystem-based approaches. I also hope that you will benefit from the sharing of good practices, experiences and tools, and integrate them into adaptation strategies at international, regional, transboundary, national and local levels.

Thank you.