

Worldwater Week, Stockholm, 19 August 2009
The UNECE Water Convention:
How a legal framework is making a difference on the ground

Speech by Ms. Uschi Eid:
The importance of transboundary water management and the role of the international community

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to speak to you here today as vice chair of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB) and I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me.

As a politician, I have basically two goals: to work towards securing peace and to work and help, that people can live a life in dignity and prosperity.

How can we secure peace and a life in dignity, when worldwide water resources are getting under severe pressure?

Triggered by pollution and overexploitation, rivers are drying up and lakes are shrinking. Rising temperature due to climate change and in addition a growing world population combined with changing life style patterns, industrialization and expanding agricultural irrigation schemes will accelerate water scarcity.

The best known examples of shrunken lakes are the Aral Lake in Central Asia and the Chad Lake in Central Africa.

I am very glad, that the Aral Lake is given central attention in this session. Because – and this is very personal – when I entered office as deputy minister for Development Cooperation in 1998, one of my urgent goals was to rescue the Aral Lake and to make sure, that good living conditions for the people in the area were being restored.

Only a few years later I learned, that James Wolfensohn, at that time the president of the World Bank, has tried the same, but had failed as well. So I was not too frustrated, that my efforts were not successful!

Today, the UN estimates that the number of people suffering from limited water supplies will more than quadruple until 2025, from 700 million today to 3 billion people by then. Even in the UNECE region an estimated 120 million people do not have access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. Facing all these challenges, more efficient and sustainable water management is therefore badly needed - within and very much across borders.

Need for regional cooperation

Regional cooperation, transboundary cooperation is badly needed and – as a tool of conflict prevention – it should not be underestimated.

Where water is not abundant, many interest groups are competing for their share, be it agriculture, industrial production, be it hydropower, households which need water to drink, clean and wash and nature itself needs water to sustain the worlds ecosystems.

Water does not know political boundaries. Problems arising from different groups using these resources and natural disasters are not limited to borders either.

Industrial accidents as in Romania in 2000, where 100.000 cubic meters of cyanide polluted the Danube, or major floods as in the Elbe river basin in 2002, have shown this very clearly. These are only two examples.

Transboundary waters worldwide and in Europe

But imagine: just to give you an impression of the magnitude of what we are talking about: Worldwide there are as many as 263 river basins which cross those boundaries. These basins account for 60% of the global freshwater flow. A total of

145 nations include territory within international basins. And these basins are the home to more than 40 percent of the world's population.

Europe has several hundred transboundary water bodies. Twenty European countries depend for more than 10% of their water resources on neighbouring countries and five countries draw 75% of their resources from upstream countries; it would be a tragedy if only these five countries were severely affected, if the upstream riparian states would pollute the rivers or build dams!

Facing the fact, that water is getting scarce while water demand is increasing, we have to put mechanisms in place to help managing these waters, to secure fair shares and to offer mechanisms to settle disputes.

Need for regulation and standards

How do we achieve a fair solution between conflicting national interests? How do we ensure that the sovereign decision of one state to withdraw a lot of water upstream does not harm the integrity of the state of the downstream country? How do we avoid that the "right of the stronger" rules, and make sure, that unilateral national decisions do not undermine the integrity and well being of other nations?

Of course there are many, many agreements on the shared use of waters. Over the last 50 years, more than 200, mostly regional or basin agreements were developed. Many only deal with a small fraction of the complex problems arising from transboundary water management or include only some of the countries sharing a basin. But more and more countries are convinced, that it is politically wise and essential to set up international standards, in order to solve problems and prevent conflicts deriving from shared water use, in order to guarantee sustainable use for the benefit of all parties. Through standardization international legal frameworks can

provide solutions, strengthen security and lay the ground for national states to act more predictably.

UNSGAB and the UN-Convention

This is why, we from UNSGAB have decided to take transboundary water management on board. Who are we from UNSGAB?

In 2004 the then Secretary General, Kofi Annan, established this board of 21 people to advise him, to help accelerating the process to supply water and sanitation in order to reach the Millennium Development Goal by 2015, namely to half the proportion of people who have no access to water and sanitation. When we developed our workplan, we chose transboundary and integrated water management as one of the six areas of engagement, because we are convinced that it is essential. As an international body we are lobbying for the “UN-Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses”, which already exists for more than 10 years (since 1997), but has not entered into force yet, because it has not been ratified by the 35 countries necessary.

UNECE Convention

Facing the fact that the UN-Convention has not come into force yet, regional institutions like the UNECE-Convention are even more important. In the course of our work, of course we were confronted with the question, weather the UN-Convention and the UNECE convention are competing with each other. NOT AT ALL! They are two different tools to prevent conflicts and manage waters in a sustainable manner. They are compatible and enforcing each other. The UN-Convention is more of a global framework, whereas the UNECE-Convention is more operational and binding. And the UNECE Convention is a very good example, how a convention can influence

transboundary water agreements on the ground. I therefore strongly recommend all countries to ratify the UN-Convention in order to secure peace and the parties to the UNECE-Convention to ratify the amendment in order to give more countries the opportunity to profit from the valuable experience and knowledge the UNECE-Convention can provide.