

**SIXTH SESSION OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES TO THE
UNECE CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION AND USE OF
TRANSBOUNDARY WATERCOURSES AND INTERNATIONAL
LAKES**

Rome, 28-30 November 2012

**Opening remarks by Mr. Andrey Vasilyev, Deputy Executive Secretary,
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to address this sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes — the Water Convention.

This meeting takes place in a year that marks the **twentieth anniversary** of the Convention's signature. It provides an opportunity to reflect on achievements and obstacles since the Convention's entry into force and, more importantly, to define a path forward and vision for the future. I am pleased to see so many ministers and other high-level representatives from different countries, whose presence underscores the importance of the Convention.

With 38 UNECE member States and the European Union now Party to the Convention, the standards established by the Convention prevail throughout much of our region. It gives me a great pleasure to welcome the **new Parties** — Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Turkmenistan — to the Convention's family.

It is also a positive sign that many **non-UNECE countries** are present here today. There has been a tremendous increase in the involvement of non-UNECE countries in Convention's activities in the past three years, and their presence today at a high-level, including in many cases at a ministerial level, demonstrates that the importance and recognition of the Convention is growing also outside the region. Two recent events to promote awareness and build capacity on the Water Convention in Africa and for the Southern Mediterranean clearly demonstrated that the Convention can offer concrete solutions to other regions of the world.

Therefore the **entry into force of the amendment to articles 25 and 26 on 6 February 2013** is a well-timed and welcome development. It is extremely positive that Parties will devote great attention during this session to facilitating accession by non-UNECE countries: there are high expectations that the Rome meeting will mark the actual global opening of the Convention.

The past three years have given us much to be proud of in terms of achievements. I would like to briefly touch upon five of them.

First: Strengthened implementation and compliance

Major progress was achieved in the field of support to implementation and compliance, with the negotiations under the Legal Board on the **Implementation Committee** to be established by the Meeting of the Parties at this session. This is an historic step in the evolution of the Convention, which will strengthen its implementation and increase its normative authority in the UNECE region and beyond.

The development of the model provisions on transboundary **groundwaters**, also to be adopted by the Meeting of the Parties, represents another step to support implementation of the Convention, in particular through integrated management of surface waters and groundwaters.

Second: The *Second Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters*

After more than three years of preparations, the *Second Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters* was launched at the Seventh “Environment for Europe” Ministerial Conference, in Astana, in September 2011. The preparation process has been the Convention’s most collaborative effort ever: it covered the entire region, with the same attention given to Parties and non-Parties, involved neighbouring non-ECE countries as well, and was carried out in close cooperation with numerous partner organizations. The result is a rich analysis of water issues, responses and trends, which reflects regional differences, specificities and vulnerabilities. The Assessment findings have provided the Convention and other actors in this area with a strong basis for their future work.

Third: Adaptation to climate change

The Convention’s work on water and adaptation to climate change has had significant impacts at the political level, as well as on the ground. The yearly workshops on water and climate change adaptation in transboundary basins have become venues of global reference for the debate on the issue. The need for transboundary cooperation in climate change adaptation has been increasingly recognized, including within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and within the European Union (EU). More and

more countries sharing transboundary basins are starting to address these issues jointly. This has led to concrete results: for example, the development of the first joint impact and vulnerability assessments at the basin level in some of the pilot projects under the Convention.

Fourth: National Policy Dialogues

Another strong pillar of the Convention's work are the activities at the national level under the EU Water Initiative National Policy Dialogues (NPDs). In 2010–2012, five new countries started NPDs on integrated water resources management (IWRM): NPDs on IWRM are now run in nine countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. NPDs have made an important contribution to the development of water sector reforms and the achievement of the water-related Millennium Development Goals. The Dialogues have also proven to be a useful framework to facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation and coordinate the action of donors, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). I encourage countries engaged in the process to continue taking advantage of the Dialogues and to maintain a high political commitment to them.

Fifth: Projects on the ground

In 2010–2012, also thanks to the work of our Regional Adviser on Environment, activities under the Convention focused increasingly on projects on the ground supporting the Convention's implementation. These projects led to numerous concrete outcomes, such as a draft regional framework for dam safety in Central Asia, the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding in the Drin Basin, the creation of a regional platform for water quality in Central Asia, or the proposals on the strengthening of the International Fund for Saving

the Aral Sea. These tangible results are powerful evidence of the usefulness of the work undertaken in the framework of the Convention at the subregional, national and basin levels, as it closely links technical and political processes, with a strong engagement and ownership of the concerned countries.

Now let me turn to the future

Our water resources are already facing **considerable pressures due** to poor management practices, pollution, overexploitation, hydromorphological alterations, inadequate investments in infrastructures and low efficiency of water use.

In future, the demands for water of a growing global population with increasing wealth and consumption levels, the projected rise of agricultural production and the needs for more primary energy will have far-reaching implications for our environment, especially water resources. Climate change will result in significant impacts on waters and some of the effects are already visible now — from floods and droughts to impacts on water quality and ecosystems.

In these circumstances, **transboundary water cooperation will be more and more vital** to prevent conflicts over water resources, to facilitate their effective and sustainable use, and to ensure an equitable distribution of the diverse benefits that accrue from using water resources and the services that they provide. However, the current level of cooperation in many basins is inadequate to cope with the existing and upcoming problems.

It is therefore very positive that the **programme of work** for the Convention's activities in the coming three years does not shy away from the

challenges ahead: on the contrary, it aims to address them at their source. The proposal you have in front of you is very comprehensive and ambitious. I would like to emphasize a number of important features.

First, it is positive to see that it reflects a continuing commitment to strengthening the three cornerstones of the Convention — implementation and compliance; assessment of progress; and capacity development and action on the ground — already with a global perspective. Second, the programme of work provides a coherent framework, where the different activities mutually reinforce each other. Third, it recognizes the importance of acting outside the water “box” to have a stronger political and more concrete impact, for instance by embarking on the new strategic area of the “water-food-energy-ecosystems” nexus. Fourth, it strongly builds on the work of partners and provides an overall framework for many international organizations and NGOs to jointly work to promote transboundary water cooperation.

It is also very positive that you project yourself beyond 2015: the **vision** you will adopt will guide your further efforts and the Convention’s future long-term evolution.

The experience and the intergovernmental platform offered by the Water Convention are more than ever needed to address the multiple challenges facing water resources. I am not only talking about the need to cooperate at the basin level — I am talking about the need to create **a global coalition** to address transboundary water resources management problems. Only by uniting forces will we be able to broaden the exchange of experience and mobilize the needed political support for transboundary water cooperation. That is why the global opening of the Convention is a great opportunity for both UNECE and non-UNECE countries: it will ensure a much needed global forum to discuss and

address these challenges and to bring transboundary water issues higher on the global political agenda.

Joining forces to advocate the importance of water should be an important political priority for all of us in the near future. As you know, in the discussions on the post-2015 United Nations development agenda, water for sustainable development has had an important recognition. It should be our clear objective to ensure the adoption of a **sustainable development goal on water**, which can guide our future efforts as well as the efforts of other sectors.

For all these reasons, I am convinced that the approach with regard to non-UNECE countries should be consistent with how the Convention and its Parties have engaged so far with non-Parties in the UNECE region. It has been an inclusive and engaging approach, involving non-Parties almost as much as Parties in its work. This openness and cooperative spirit has brought tremendous results, not only in terms of increased membership but also in terms of stronger capacity in non-Parties.

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 2014. 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 inefficient use of resources. The similarities and complementarity of the two Conventions should be built upon through exchanges and coordination between their Parties. I am pleased to see that Parties to the Water Convention are taking a proactive approach in addressing this complex issue and will be discussing it at this session.

The implementation of the comprehensive and ambitious programme of work in front of us will necessitate not only the active involvement of Parties but also the establishment of strong **partnerships**. Only thanks to our governmental and non-governmental partners has it been possible to mobilize the support needed for the Convention's implementation so far. Among current partners, a special note is deserved by the International Water Assessment Centre (IWAC), the Convention's collaborating centre hosted till now by the Slovak Hydrometeorological Institute.

In the future, partnerships will become even more fundamental. I am pleased to see that a number of possible partners are ready to engage in the implementation of the various activities in the programme of work. The Meeting of the Parties will discuss the development of a closer cooperation between the Convention and the Global Environmental Facility, and the strengthening of the partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Such examples should encourage other interested organizations to use the Convention in their work and contribute to its implementation.

One other important issue are resources

The future programme of work reflects the political will of Parties to take an active and forward-looking approach. Success to date has been made possible through the high level of commitment by Parties as well as supporting organizations. In particular, I would like to thank all those countries and organizations that have led activities and contributed in kind or in cash to the Convention trust fund. Contributions have increased in recent years, and much

has been done thanks to this funding. It will still be a particular challenge for 2013–2015, however, to secure all the funding for programme implementation.

I therefore urge you to continue to support the Convention's trust fund, including by providing adequate resources to support the secretariat. I also would like to invite you to consider opportunities to further strengthen the secretariat, such as by offering junior professional officers, and, where possible, to consider taking the lead in programme implementation.

Finally, allow me to express our gratitude to Italy, the host country, for its warm hospitality. The Italian hosts, both the Ministry of the Environment, Land and Sea and the Chamber of Deputies, made an extraordinary effort to successfully prepare for this meeting, and have been an extremely professional partners for the secretariat.

I would also like to thank Switzerland, and in particular Ms. Sibylle Vermont, our Chair, for the strong commitment, leadership and support during the past three years of her tenure. I really hope that Switzerland will continue to play an important role in the future. The Convention needs such a strong ambassador.

Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you success in your deliberations. Thank you.