Joining Humanitarian and Development Forces to Respond to Protracted Crises

Opening remarks by Danilo Türk, 20 January 2022, Online

Distinguished participants,

It is an honour to have the opportunity to make a few introductory remarks today – in my capacity as former Chairman of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace, currently cooperating with the Geneva Water Hub as political Advisor.

The theme to be discussed today belongs to the most fundamental requirements of both humanitarian and development action, the theme of joining forces. I wish to emphasize, our time is not the time for despondency and despair – no matter how difficult the humanitarian problems today tend to be - but rather one for energetic mobilisation. The understanding of importance of what is called "the triple nexus", i.e, the inherent connections between development, humanitarian action and peace can help and is gaining traction – as witnessed in the recent pronouncements of the OECD and the European Union.

The combined experience of participants of today's meeting, your knowledge and ideas justify the expectation of energetic mobilisation. Moreover, the report that serves as the basis of our meeting - "Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises" - justifies high expectations. This is due to the high quality of analysis contained in the report, its clear focus on water as a vital priority, the compelling nature of its recommendations and, importantly, because the report is a product of cooperation of three key actors – the World Bank, ICRC and UNICEF. Working together enables finding a credible path towards solutions.

We are all aware of the seriousness and complexity of the situations our discussion is going to address. Humanitarian crises are becoming more and more protracted and usually add the humanitarian problem to the pre-existing development problem. An enabling security environment of these situations, sometimes characterised by international military presence, is usually not sustainable and is often non-existent. And the world public opinion is not sufficiently engaged. Political leaders are not sufficiently pressed to work out political solutions and often the humanitarian work is seen as a substitute for real solutions.

Water resources and water infrastructure are particularly affected. This is not a new problem. However, it has become more serious than before, in particular in situations of protracted urban warfare where damage or destruction of water or electricity infrastructure causes reverberating effects across the affected

urban areas and makes the provision of basic social services, such as health care and education extremely difficult and sometimes impossible.

Attacks on water resources and water infrastructure are violations of humanitarian law. The Geneva Water Hub has systematically organised the applicable legal principles, the "Geneva Principles", that provide the normative framework which ought to be respected in all situations of armed conflicts. But there are protracted periods of "neither war nor peace" when the civilian population continues to suffer. Joining forces in such circumstances is essential to bring hope to the affected people.

Protracted crises require innovative approaches. Let us just think about the depth and geographical scope of humanitarian problems in Afghanistan and in the Sahel in Africa. Clearly, innovation is the order of the day and innovation must be based on solid understanding of the challenges today, taking into account the entirety of the past experience.

This is precisely where the report "Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises" comes into the picture. While the report focuses on the crises in the Middle East and North Africa, the lessons learned in those crises situations have global relevance. It is interesting how water drives innovation.

The report offers a comprehensive analysis of the problems of water and sanitation in protracted humanitarian crises. Importantly, it starts with the realisation about inadequate water resource management that existed before the crises that explain consequent problems during the crises. The latter include aggressive competition among alternative water providers, the inadequacy of high tech infrastructure in the crisis areas and, in particular, the financial problems of investing in water infrastructure during the crises.

These problems can be addressed only with a joint action of humanitarian, developmental, technical and financial actors. They all have to understand the importance of humanitarian-peace-development nexus. Investing in water infrastructure is never easy. Water infrastructure does not yield high profits and always requires public spending, even in normal, "non - crisis situations." In countries with a weak basis of public finance water infrastructure will remain inadequately developed.

These problems can be addressed over time with a carefully coordinated work of humanitarian and development actors and, above all, with their cooperation. Appropriate partnerships among these actors are necessary. In cases where security forces are deployed to provide secure environment for humanitarian and development work, they have to give adequate priority attention to protection of water infrastructure, its repair and maintenance.

It is important to recognise the leading role of local water service providers in restoring water services during protracted crises. This is necessary to get the priorities and timing of construction and repair right

and to allow development actors to work out appropriate planning and financing in cooperation with central authorities. Furthermore, humanitarian and development actors should work closely with the local providers in order to prepare for potentially acute phases of the crisis. Ideally, such cooperation and partnership should start at the pre-crisis situations. The importance of data and sharing of data cannot be overemphasised. Development actors and humanitarian organisations should share their knowledge so as to enable adequate contingency planning.

Naturally, such a comprehensive approach requires support at the high political level. The European Union as the world's largest humanitarian donor and provider of development assistance should integrate these elements in its policy. The European Commission, the Council and the Parliament should be fully informed and fully engaged. Other international donors should do the same.

I hope that our discussion today will offer a set of proposals that will represent an important contribution to the process of joining humanitarian and development forces to respond to protracted crises.

I thank you for your attention.