

Navigating the COVID-19 crisis for the water and peace agenda

A white paper

The Geneva Water Hub is a centre of excellence specialised in hydropolitics and hydrodiplomacy. Its objective is to better understand and contribute to the prevention of tensions related to water by taking into account conflicts of uses between public sectors and private sectors, between political entities, and between states. The Geneva Water Hub is the Secretariat of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace and engages in the promotion and the implementation of the Panel's recommendations published in September 2017.

The Geneva Water Hub aims at developing the hydropolitics agenda to help prevent water-related conflicts at an early stage at intersectoral and transboundary levels, and to promote water as an instrument of peace and cooperation with the support of the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and the University of Geneva.

For more information, kindly contact the Geneva Water Hub – Secretariat of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace at the following e-mail address: contact@genevawaterhub.org and visit our website at www.genevawaterhub.org

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The COVID-19 virus has severely impacted the functioning of the various socio-economic-political systems governing our world. The widespread “lock-down” (confinement) of billions of individuals has shed light on the degree of resilience of contemporary societies, as well as on the weaknesses of a system that we thought immutable. This external shock has undermined mechanisms that had become structuring for several decades, paving the way for identifying new ways of living, interacting, and governing, and bringing to light fragilities at different levels (from local to global). Examples of these are: the abrupt end of an economic growth supposedly ensuring stability, or the debates about the response provided by democratic and/or authoritarian systems. Finally, it is key to note the strengthening of the nationalistic isolationist rhetoric and of “deglobalisation” with a view to ensure safety as well as the loss of significant influence of the advocates of multilateralism.

Most of the dynamics mentioned above did not wait for COVID-19 to become a reality. However, the current crisis has contributed to strengthening polarized rhetoric and accentuating trends already observed.

With this in mind, the Geneva Water Hub has defined six main lines of emphasis concerning its action and relevance in the context of the current period. These lines of force offer perspectives to position the strategic agenda of the Geneva Water Hub and guide its different lines of action. They provide an opportunity to produce a common and coherent narrative to address the challenges of the water, peace, humanitarian response, and sustainability nexus.

Our reflection will not tackle the issues of drinking water supply or of sanitation and hygiene, as these issues are already discussed in detail by many bodies and organizations. While stressing the importance of basic services related to water (whether in time of crisis or not), we focus on the positioning of the Geneva Water Hub regarding “its core business”, namely water as an essential instrument for peace and cooperation. This document is likely to constantly evolve, and it will be revised depending on the evolution of the sanitation and political situation.

Identified lines of emphasis

1. To contribute to the interface between science and policy

Governmental response to the health crisis has been multiple. If, in fact, a multiplicity of causal hypotheses in the definition of public policies is not uncommon, it is worth noticing the gap that was sometimes created between political response and scientific evidence.

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed various links between science and policy. On the one hand, the crisis has enhanced the status of science in political decision-making. On the other hand, we note the appearance of a sometimes-fragile link between scientific approaches and marked political considerations for populist tendencies (UK, Brazil, US, etc.).

As a think tank based at the University of Geneva, the Geneva Water Hub is intrinsically linked to the promotion and strengthening of the interface between science and policy. This interface is crucial to consider the challenges of water security; challenges characterized by a particularly high complexity¹, by considerable rivalries of use, and by various degrees of institutional fragmentation.

By doing so, the Geneva Water Hub promotes the need to shed light on political decision-making through scientific approaches. The Geneva Water Hub stresses the role of academic structures for the production of teaching and scientific research from an interdisciplinary perspective and emphasizes the need to become engaged both in the strengthening of and in a better understanding of the interface between science and politics (and in particular of the power relations that may occur). Finally, it insists on the need to strengthen

¹ “Wicked Problem”.

the dialogue between the scientific and political world for a better understanding of the respective constraints, limits, and temporalities.

Strategic positioning

- Promote the additional value of the Geneva Water Hub in the science and policy interface (through publications and conceptual reflections);
- In collaboration with its partners and its academic network, the Geneva Water Hub must continue to develop training, targeting in particular active practitioners in decision-making bodies (e.g., ministries, NGOs of influence, members of parliaments, etc.).

2. Promote the role of International Geneva

The widespread confinement contributes to a certain dematerialisation of interactions through the use of virtual platforms. In doing so, the importance of certain places and certain symbolisms could be reduced. This dematerialisation is a challenge for political and diplomatic processes requiring a relationship of trust and places allowing for exchange both in a formal and in an informal manner. Besides, online tools require practice and mastering certain virtual communication codes that are not uniformly accepted.

The Geneva Water Hub is convinced of the importance of International Geneva as a propitious place for multilateralism and negotiation processes. In doing so, in a time of crisis, one needs to capitalize on the advantages of International Geneva and contribute to its valorisation. With the progressive deconfinement, new opportunities must be created to bring together the diplomatic stakeholders dealing with the issues of water, peace, and security.

The Group of Friends (GoF) on Water and Peace can play an important role with sessions that may be organized in Geneva, making sure health measures and distances are respected. In line with the objective of “back to back safe spaces on water and peace”, the Geneva Water Hub could organize a cycle of meetings of the GoF to address the link between the lines of force identified in the present document and the elaboration of the agenda of water and peace. Additionally, the safe spaces that we are developing in Geneva on several thematic areas linked to water and peace will be reinforced. If the development generated by the safe spaces materialises at the international level, the image of Geneva plays an important role for these procedures through the values Geneva represents such as neutrality, multilateralism, openness, innovation, human rights, and safety.

Strategic positioning

- Make the most of the GoF on Water and Peace as a promotion platform for the role of International Geneva for the water, peace, and security agenda;
- Initiate most safe space reflections within International Geneva;
- Get involved in key platforms of International Geneva (e.g., Human rights council, Geneva Peace Week, etc.).

3. Identifying structural fragilities to think safely

The COVID-19 crisis has shed light on the links of dependence and the interconnections between various basic supplies and services, a high proportion of which are linked with water. The crisis has raised concerns regarding safety issues. We can, for instance, mention the supply problem of protective masks and sanitary products, concerns regarding the supply capacity of hospitals for medicines, or the risks related to crops and food safety issues. In other words, the current crisis sheds light on the fragilities of an economic system

built on the principle of maximisation of short-term profit, hardly considering crises prevention or major accidents.

Concerning the agenda of water and peace, it may be assumed that these structural fragilities and their political interpretation might have an impact on international cooperation. In particular, we note the appearance of dynamics of strengthening national sovereignism and the appearance of a political narrative built on self-reliance in spite of the mutual dependency expressed by the crisis.

Regarding multilateralism and international cooperation as factors for peace and stability, the Geneva Water Hub considers withdrawal from others at the national level as dangerous and non-productive. This type of dynamic can rather lead to a resurgence of international tensions and to a decrease of transboundary cooperation. Thus, the goal is to maintain the promotion of international conventions structuring the sector, notably the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes whose secretariat is based in Geneva. Like other Swiss think tanks, we must reflect on these interdependencies and fragilities while emphasizing the interests of international cooperation.

Strategic positioning

- Together with our partners, focus on the promotion of multilateral agreements for the water, peace, and security agenda;
- Support and develop the commitment of basin organizations that have the potential to be key structures for peace and cooperation;
- In fragile zones and war contexts, continue to position water as a vector of peace and cooperation.

4. Strengthen the position of local considerations and bottom-up dynamics

The means of communication that have been used during the crisis highlight the existing digital gap. Not all the actors are equal when accessing digital technologies nor the internet.

In this context, one needs to reflect on the integration of “bottom-up” dynamics and the integration of local voices. For example, in the case of the Sahel, where rural communities are already marginalized when it comes to decision processes, the widespread use of online communication does not tend to improve such prejudice.

Such disparities when including local population into decision making, strengthened by the challenges of accessing information and means of communication, are concerning in various regards. On the one hand, the processes of decision and negotiation can be questioned, and on the other hand, the payoffs from including a diversity of knowledge are greatly reduced, and therefore, limit understanding the complexity of issues. Governmental solutions provided to face the COVID-19 pandemic have moreover emphasized social inequalities by, for example, subsidizing water and electricity services when only a minority of the population benefits from such services. Considering the lack of confidence that such measures have brought up, the need for political dialogue has increased, and asks for a proper decision framework to be set up.

The Geneva Water Hub is particularly well equipped to give a voice to local communities. Using such channels as the “Safe Space” and arenas like the Global Observatory for Water and Peace, the visibility of bottom-up dynamics increase, and vertical interactions between actors working at different institutional levels are reinforced.

Strategic positioning

- Strengthen the contribution of the Global Observatory for Water and Peace regarding the visibility of local communities (possibly lacking digital access), and for better inclusion of various knowledge for a better understanding of the challenges faced by the water, peace, and security agenda.

5. Contribute to the identification of new sources of financing to benefit water management transboundary cooperation

From a financial point of view, the global deadlock following the COVID-19 crisis had major impacts on national economies and financial markets. The strong fluctuation of the price of the oil barrel or the unemployment rates boom are just some illustrations of the consequences of this crisis. As countries are slowly planning the end of “lockdown” to limit economical damage, one can expect that the crisis will have a lasting impact on economies, leading to deep uncertainties on the long-term, new priorities emerging, and undergoing new arbitration.

In this context, the Geneva Water Hub continues to develop research to identify innovative financing mechanisms for international cooperation in the water sector. The work on possible procedures and institutional architecture must be carried on, and a specific line of action to identify new actors, new financing sources, and related linkages must be developed. The Geneva Water Hub could play the role of “match-maker” to connect actors that are perceived as unconventional.

Strategic positioning

- In conjunction with our partners, expand research of potential sources of financing and their inter-connection.

6. Emphasize precautionary approaches rather than those that are curative

For many actors (e.g., international organizations, WHO, scientific community, NGOs, etc.), the emergence of COVID-19 did not come as a surprise. For more than 10 years, many voices have risen to warn of the possibility of a pandemic such as the one we are living now². Despite such signals and related past events (e.g., SARS in 2003), the crisis unfolded in most countries, which, taken off guard, had to improvise emergency measures. Not to mention the fact that scientific data was seldom used in political decisions, the current crisis illustrates the operational, human, and financial pitfalls of a curative approach rather than a precautionary one. The crisis has illustrated this, sometimes structural, tendency of governing systems that affects numerous sectors, and certainly does not spare the water and peace agenda.

² These include, for example, Bill Gate’s Ted Talk, or scientific publications such as Cheng et al. (2007) in Clinical Microbiology Reviews.

With many relevant tools at hand in this context, the Geneva Water Hub is thereupon committed to promote precautionary policies and the precautionary principle for the water, peace, and cooperation agenda. The Geneva Water Hub must contribute to strengthening the narrative of precautionary diplomacy. The diplomatic efforts carried out by the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace, supported by the Geneva Water Hub, led to a session at the United Nation Security Council in June 2017 based on precautionary diplomacy and transboundary waters³. This discussion will continue in 2021 at the heart of the World Water Forum in Senegal. In order to support this process, the identification of appropriate tools is key; the illustration and promotion of good practices is essential; and a deep reflexion on the value of the benefits of prevention and the cost of inaction has to take place.

Strategic positioning

→ In relation to the Global Observatory on Water and Peace, set up and promote a catalogue of good practices regarding precautionary diplomacy for the water sector.

³ www.un.org/press/fr/2017/cs12856.doc.htm