

Water – a Catalyst for Sustainable Development and Peace

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By

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It is a great pleasure to be with you today, at the Launch of the Water Month in the Swiss Pavilion of the Expo in Dubai.

I am grateful to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation for hosting this event devoted to water as a catalyst for sustainable development and peace.

I am proud to speak on behalf of the Geneva Water Hub, an organisation that has accumulated considerable knowledge and experience related to the topic of water and peace.

As explained in the invitation to our meeting today, the world is facing an unprecedented water crisis. We are reminded of two disturbing features: the sheer scale of the crisis and of the existential stakes it imposes on the humankind.

Today, around two billion people lack access to safe drinking water. Moreover, water scarcity is exacerbated in a world with a growing population, facing human-induced climate change.

And the needs for water will grow. The humankind will have to find ways to produce fifty per cent more food and double the energy production by the middle of the century. These activities will require massive water resources to meet the needs of the growing population and to maintain environmental conditions critical for the functioning of life support systems.

In short, water is a problem of gigantic proportions. At the same time we must be aware of the depth of the problem: For humans, the only thing whose absence kills you faster than the absence of water is the absence of oxygen.

And water has no substitute. The only substitute for water – is water.

Water is shaping history. Water has shaped landscapes, defined boundaries and enabled civilisations to flourish, while causing others to collapse.

This is a historic lesson we must not ignore. In the most sensitive era of the Anthropocene, in which we live now, our common future depends on water. Entire regions may become uninhabitable as a consequence of global warming

and the resulting long periods of droughts. Still other areas are confronted with violent storms and floods, with water disasters of unprecedented magnitude.

Water is the main medium of climate change. Adaptation to climate change already requires major adjustments to the situations of water scarcity and to massive floods, not experienced in previous history.

In addition, the world has to understand the nature of the contemporary armed conflicts and their impact on water resources. Areas of water scarcity are among the most fragile and often violent regions of the world. Water resources and installations are being increasingly attacked and used as weapons of war.

These tendencies give rise to serious concerns and call for new types of response, including through the mechanisms of humanitarian assistance and humanitarian law, combined with development assistance and with diplomatic efforts aiming at peace. The “triple nexus approach” combining development, humanitarian assistance and peace making is becoming ever more necessary.

Studying this “big picture of water” makes it clear that a new paradigm of water use, water management and international water cooperation is urgently called for.

The conceptual basis for a new water paradigm already exists.

The right to safe drinking water was recognised by the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council in 2010. Five years later, in 2015, the General Assembly recognised the human right to sanitation as a distinct human right.

Are these solemn pronouncements a mere expression of human aspirations, or should they constitute the basis for effective policy making and legal obligations?

It is broadly recognised that the latter should be the case. All states and all businesses are under the obligation to refrain from unjustifiably interfering with enjoyment of the human right to safe drinking water. Depletion of water resources, over-extraction, diversion and pollution of water are not merely undesirable practices. They constitute a threat to human rights and have to be dealt with as such.

It is also recognised that water is an essential part of the sustainable development goals which were adopted – by consensus – at the United Nations in 2015.

“Ensure access to water and sanitation for all by 2030” – declared the Sustainable Goal 6 of the United Nations Agenda 2030. Water is a sustainable development goal in its own right as well as a *sine qua non* for all others – from food security to global health and to the goal of ensuring a peaceful and inclusive society.

The mentioned principles and goals testify to the awareness of the international community regarding the importance of water. However, the needed practical action remains inadequate.

Today, realisation of the Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water and sanitation is badly off track. This assessment is shared by water specialists, policy makers and diplomats the world over. The situation today already points to grave humanitarian problems that will affect the humankind in the future. Therefore, when discussing the problems of water we have to think about the most vulnerable, the young people and about future generations.

It is estimated that by 2040, one in four of the world’s children under age of 18 – some 600 million in all – will be living in areas of high water stress.

Water is a key requirement of public health – as the world has learned while fighting COVID -19 Pandemic. Handwashing with soap is one of the most effective ways to limit the spread of COVID 19 and other infectious diseases. Water borne diseases continue to represent a major global health problem, in particular in areas affected by armed conflicts and particularly affecting children.

And in all these development and peace challenges, women and girls suffer disproportionately. For example, women and girls in low-income countries spend some 40 billion hours per year collecting water. This is equivalent to the annual work hours of the entire workforce of France.

Young people are the ones who will suffer in the future. They are already restless. And restlessness may lead to unrest.

Let us not forget – unrest is the voice of the unheard. The world has to hear the youth and engage the youth in the search for solutions.

The question is: What ought to be done in the current, deeply disturbing situation? What can the governments of the world do? What can we do? What can the Government of Switzerland do? What can our hosts of the United Arab Emirates do? What the experts with us in this room right now do?

It is clear that international cooperation is of vital importance. It is also clear that the needed cooperation has to be inclusive, involving not only governments but

also the private sector, the academia and civil society. And that civil society engagement has to give voice to women and youth.

But what are the actual solutions in our era? What should be done to make water management and water cooperation a significant catalyst for sustainable development and peace?

I am convinced that our discussion today will help finding good guidance towards the needed solutions.

Let me try to make a small contribution by making two suggestions – one related to transboundary water cooperation and the other to protection of water resources and infrastructure during armed conflicts.

Three quarters of UN member states share rivers and lake basins with their neighbours. Since the establishment of the United Nations, more than two hundred water treaties have been successfully negotiated. In addition, the UN has adopted two multilateral water conventions: The 1997 Watercourses Convention and the 1992 UN ECE Water Convention that is now open for accession to all UN member states.

Transboundary water cooperation is a good example of the needed peaceful cooperation, making a contribution to international stability and peace. Among the specific treaties of cooperation, the Indus Waters Agreement between India and Pakistan, and the Senegal River Basin Organisation are most often quoted as examples.

But there is still much work to be done to improve transboundary water cooperation – in Central Asia, throughout Latin America, in the Middle East, in parts of Africa and elsewhere. Transboundary water cooperation should expand and include innovations.

This is particularly necessary in the region of the Middle East, which belongs to the most water stressed areas of the world. Water scarcity is a fundamental feature of the region. At present, climate-induced decreases in precipitation and climate-induced increases in evaporation are adding to the already disturbing ground water depletion. More frequent and intense droughts add to desertification, the loss of crops and decreasing agricultural production.

All this calls for improvements in policies related to water, including with regard to transboundary water cooperation.

The majority of available freshwater resources here in this region are of a transboundary kind. They include aquifers, not least of all the *Umm er*

Radhuma-Dhammam, which is so key to UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman, as well as transboundary surface waters.

A few surface water systems are governed bilaterally and they can be improved and expanded. However, no comprehensive, equitable regional agreement governing water quantity and quality exists in the region. This is a serious shortcoming in a region where water stress levels are nearly twice the world average and by far the highest of any region of the world.

In these circumstances regional transboundary water cooperation seems to be a critically important necessity. It will have to be ambitious and innovative.

In fact, any regional system of water cooperation has to be ambitious and innovative. The Senegal River Organisation – the OMVS - is an example of such an ambitious, innovative and visionary approach that should inspire.

In the Middle East the vision and ambition should go even further, given the needs - and the almost limitless natural, financial and human resources that exist in the region. What is needed is a vision and political will. The SDC's Blue Peace Middle East Programme is well targeted in this regard and I am delighted that we shall hear more about it from its Director-General, Mrs. Patrizia Danzi.

In the past, suggestions have already been made that countries in the region could take inspiration from the experience of the Coal and Steel Community that connected two essential resources in Europe for the region's post war reconstruction. That approach also laid the foundations for the subsequent intense cooperation and economic integration in Europe.

In the Middle East, the sea and the sun could be the way forward. Desalination of the sea water is already a major industry in the region. At the current stage it is powered mostly by energy of the hydrocarbons. A more ambitious and long term approach would harness solar power as a permanent source of energy that would be also carbon neutral and low cost. Creating a "water and energy community" sounds futuristic. But research, know-how and the relevant resources largely exist. What is still needed is the political will to move forward.

As the European example of Coal and Steel Community has shown, an innovative cooperative arrangement can go a long way towards establishing an entirely new level of interdependence among states and, yes, it does create the basis for durable peace.

This vision should be developed in parallel with the existing and future strengthening of cooperation in the basins of the large rivers in the region. This will be of great importance for the use of water as a catalyst of sustainable

development and peace and will have to be supported by the entire international community and its most powerful players.

I turn now to my second suggestion,

The future of water requires vision and political will for ambitious programs. However, at the same time, it requires better and more effective ways of addressing water issues in the brutal reality of armed conflicts.

Contemporary armed conflicts increasingly involve armed attacks against water resources and water infrastructure or the use of water as a weapon of war affecting civilian populations. These challenges too have to be addressed in the discussion on water as a catalyst of sustainable development and peace.

Two years ago the Geneva Water Hub published an important document: The Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Resources. The List systematised the applicable principles of international humanitarian law, the water law and human rights law. These Geneva Principles now represent a real manual to be used by policy makers, by humanitarian workers and, most important, by military commanders.

Much work is being done by way of advocacy of these principles, including in cooperation with the United Nations, the ICRC, UNICEF and with other humanitarian organisations. Just two days ago in Geneva, we had the latest among the meetings of representatives from humanitarian organisations, including the ICRC, and several militaries to define further action.

International humanitarian law must be upheld, despite all the complexities of modern, largely urban, warfare. States must *respect and ensure respect* for humanitarian law in all circumstances – as the common Article 1 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions stipulates.

These days the ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine shows the devastating effect of modern warfare on the water infrastructure. According to a recent urgent appeal of the ICRC, more than one million people on either side of the line of contact are being affected by the attacks on water infrastructure. Hospitals, among other institutions, are affected as well.

Most of the contemporary armed conflicts are protracted armed conflicts. They have a particularly pernicious effect on water infrastructure, as well as on electricity, public health and on other basic services.

In these situations protection of water infrastructure during the armed conflict itself will not be enough. The water systems that have been inadequately managed even before the conflict are particularly vulnerable. When they break down people are exposed to severe shortages of water and to competition among the alternative, private water providers.

The inadequacy of technical and financial resources which are necessary for the repairs and reconstruction leads to a further problem. Water crisis that was initially caused by armed attacks becomes a protracted water disaster, as the effects reverberate onto essential services and on people's health and livelihoods.

A comprehensive policy response is needed. Only by addressing both the ongoing humanitarian crisis and pre-existing development challenges it becomes possible to stem the decline in service delivery and in building resilience to future hazards. This is particularly necessary in the protracted urban warfare that represents an increasingly prominent characteristic of contemporary armed conflicts.

In such circumstances the traditional humanitarian assistance has to be combined with the work of development actors and, whenever possible, with security providers. Peace building and repair of water infrastructure cannot be simply delegated to a post conflict phase, because a definitive cessation of violence may simply not be possible over a very long period of time.

Problems like these are increasingly addressed by a number of international humanitarian and development actors – including the ICRC, UNICEF, the World Bank, the EU and OECD in what is called the “triple nexus” of humanitarian action, development work, and diplomacy aiming at peace.

I am sure that these serious problems will be much more fully addressed by Mr. Peter Maurer, the President of the ICRC, whose knowledge and experience will help us to identify solutions for the future.

Let me conclude. The range of water related problems – from the ones caused by global warming to the acute situations of contemporary armed conflicts – demonstrate the drama of water today and for the future. The world is not yet prepared to face the entire front. The time is running out. This is why the meetings like our meeting today are so timely and important. This meeting shows that the Swiss and UAE Governments aimed very well in hosting it.

I wish you much success in your discussions and, above all, in your future work.