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Statement

by

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United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary

of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

Workshop on Green Recovery and Technologies in Central Asia

High-Level Panel

**“Engaging International Organisations in Water Management Development
in Central Asia”**

10:10 – 11:00 (Geneva time)

28 April 2021

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues,

To begin, let me express my sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic for the organization of this very important event.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the planet. Many countries are drawing up their post-COVID recovery plans and measures to support people and economies. When doing that, we need to draw lessons from the current situation to build our resilience, and hopefully avoid, or at least mitigate future crises.

To do so, supporting the shift to a more **circular economy** is a key priority. The 2020 Circularity Gap Report estimates that the global circularity rate stands at only 8.6%. Clearly, more efforts need to be undertaken. In the pan-European region, UNECE offers a comprehensive Toolbox of practical instruments to help countries increase circularity. This crucial topic was at the core of our discussions at UNECE's 69th Commission session last week.

Central Asia is a very important region, a transit crossroads with amazing biodiversity, cultural heritage and socio-economic potential. However, there are also governance issues, inequalities, and huge pressures on scarce natural resources such as water, which are exacerbated by climate change.

UNECE has extensive experience and provides support to countries on sustainable water management, which helps facilitate connectivity, address transboundary and other risks, support the green recovery needed to reach the Sustainable Development Goals, and increase resilience for the future.

UNECE hosts a number of **Multilateral Environmental Agreements** that are relevant for this workshop:

- For nearly 30 years, and recently also at the global level, the **Water Convention** has provided a unique legal and inter-governmental framework for transboundary cooperation in integrated water resources management, through capacity building, developing guidance, exchange of experience and projects on the ground. I invite Slovakia and all Central Asian countries to participate at high level in the upcoming ninth Meeting of the Parties on 29 September-1 October this year, and to support the future work programme.
 - **The Protocol on Water and Health**, hosted by UNECE and WHO/Europe, provides a unique legally binding governance framework for setting integrated national objectives on water, sanitation, health and climate. The Protocol supports efforts to uphold basic human rights to water and sanitation – a key defense against the pandemic. Between 2000 and 2017, it has contributed to 63 million people gaining access to drinking water and 84 million to sanitation services in the UNECE region. The Protocol is yet to welcome first Parties from Central Asia.
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Thus, I would like to call on all countries of the region to accede to the Protocol.

Let me now answer the question on the role of International organizations by bringing to your attention concrete examples of such tools and approaches being applied or promoted in Central Asia by UNECE and our partners.

- We need to support intersectoral dialogue. With financing of the European Union through WECOOP programme, UNECE is supporting inter-sectoral **National Policy Dialogues** on Integrated Water Resources Management in Central Asian countries, which facilitate implementation of concrete "policy packages" defined at the national level and focused on priorities selected by the national governments. Water quality issues in a transboundary context, including with regards to preventing accidental water pollution, are among the highest priorities.
 - International Organizations need to support climate change adaptation and mitigation and the implementation of the Paris Agreement. Adopting **nature-based solutions** as a guiding principle will be highly beneficial for the economic recovery and future development. A very successful example is our nature-based climate adaptation solution: This included pilot restoration of important floodplain forests and promotion of innovative irrigation solutions in the transboundary Chu-Talas basin between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.
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- International Organizations should support Central Asia in addressing major, sometimes forgotten challenges, such as the **safe management of dams**. A UNECE project in this field assists the beneficiary countries to address issues, such as capacity development, legal and institutional strengthening, and the improvement of region-wide cooperation. I would like to sincerely thank the Slovak's Vodospadarska Vystavba, which has become an important partner in our dam safety work and which supported a week-long training and a seminar for some 20 Central Asian experts in 2019.
- Finally, International Organizations should empower regional and local organizations. The International Water Assessment Centre (IWAC) was established as a collaborative centre of the Water Convention to translate international obligations into concrete actions on the ground. We are very grateful to the previous host of IWAC - the Slovak Hydrometeorological Institute in Bratislava – who has helped to transfer important expertise and experience to the new host, Kazakhstan. IWAC supporting regional water management and capacity building projects focusing on neighbouring Central Asian countries. Slovakia continues to provide support to IWAC and other institutions in Central Asia on a wide range of water related issues, including sharing rich experience of cooperation in the Danube basin, as a long-standing member of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River. I would like to thank very much Slovakia for this support and encourage you to continue.

The unprecedented scale of the current challenge clearly demonstrated that we need **to work together, collaborate more effectively and remain committed**

to our goal of healthy people on a healthy green planet. In this regard, I would like to highlight and thank for the very good cooperation with Peter Burian, EU Special Representative for Central Asia, who plays a very important role in the region.

I am looking forward to our interesting discussions and fruitful future cooperation.

Thank you.
