



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

**Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE
Economic and Environmental Activities**

OCEEA Webinar

Environmental Co-operation in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

Vienna, 20 May 2020, 10:30-12:30 (Vienna Time)

Welcoming Remarks

**Ambassador Vuk Žugić
Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities**

**Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am very pleased to welcome you to today's webinar dedicated to the topic of "Environmental Co-operation in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic". This event is part of a series of Webinars on the Second Dimension and COVID-19 that my Office has initiated during this challenging crisis. With the support of experts and practitioners from national governments, think tanks, international organizations, the private sector and academia these webinars aim at facilitating discussions among our participating States on the economic and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on how the OSCE could support its participating States in coping with and recovering from the crisis.

Today's webinar focuses on the importance of environmental co-operation in the time of COVID-19 pandemic and on how our Organization can contribute to strengthening emergency response and enhancing environmental sustainability through regional co-operation and partnerships.

Distinguished participants,

In the following, I would like to cover three main points: first, environmental challenges require our full attention as their significance will continue to rise in the near future, including in relation to such events like the current COVID-19 pandemic; second, environmental co-operation is a key prerequisite for viable and sustainable solutions in addressing these challenges; and third, my focus will be placed on the linkages of our work with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I will focus first on the importance of addressing environmental challenges, as an integral part of the comprehensive response to security, safety and peace, including during crisis situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread around the world at an extremely rapid pace, affecting all countries. Since its outbreak, in the last quarter of 2019, it has affected people around the world, causing severe human suffering, close to 5 million confirmed cases and nearly 300,000 deaths (current WHO stats). Causing major disruption to the global economy, it has also brought to the forefront of discussions the importance for people around the world to have access to clean water and sanitation, the need to limit air pollution, to ensure a green recovery process and to strengthen resilience to natural and man-made disasters, exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

There are numerous ongoing endeavours worldwide that discuss, study and address the linkages between environmental challenges and the current COVID – 19 pandemic, be it related to the potential exacerbating factors, such as air pollution or climate change, or related to the enabling conditions that support the emergency response, such as access to clean water and sanitation. While the ongoing research addressing these complex interlinkages is still in its initial stage, it is clear there can be no integrated emergency and disaster preparedness response without due consideration to environmental issues.

In supporting our participating States to tackle environment and security challenges we have been active in a number of areas, including water management – by supporting participating States in increasing water-use efficiency and integrated water resources management, in particular in transboundary context such as Dniester and Chu-Talas River Basins, and addressing water diplomacy issues; disaster risk reduction, through strengthening resilience at local level in disaster risk reduction and planning or strengthening early warning capacities in wildfire management, across the OSCE area; hazardous waste management, by addressing risks associated with hazardous waste and other dangerous chemicals as well as on preventing their illegal transboundary trafficking, as in Central Asia, South Caucasus and South-Eastern Europe; climate change, by providing a platform for political dialogue on risks associated with climate change as well as raising awareness on and assessing potential security risks stemming from climate change; and good environmental governance, by promoting compliance with Multilateral Environmental Agreements, including the establishment and functioning of Aarhus Centres, which facilitate the implementation of Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters.

Almost all of our environmental activities have a gender-mainstreaming component, and one of the projects is entirely focused on increasing the role of women in water management in Central Asia.

This leads me to the second point of my remarks – environmental co-operation as a key prerequisite for viable and sustainable solutions.

Similarly to environmental challenges, COVID-19 does not stop at borders. The need for a co-operative approach at all levels- community, state, regional and global has become a must in fighting this common threat. This issue was reiterated on a number of occasions by the international community, which underlined the enhanced need for solidarity, inclusivity and a participatory approach in which stakeholders at all levels play a significant role in providing an integrated response to the current crisis. The importance and benefits of co-operation and

collaboration in collectively addressing emerging challenges, whether in the field of environment and security, economy and health related or the relevant synergies are more timely than ever.

The Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative, is one such example that brings together the OSCE, UNECE, UNDP and UNEP with the primary objective to tackle environment and security risks through promoting environmental co-operation among and within the countries of Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Last year we signed a new MoU between ENVSEC Initiative partners, renewing our commitments under this time-tested arrangement and we will be happy to continue our co-operation with our long-term partners. ENVSEC is also an example of how, at the regional level, we contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

As I come to my third and last point of my remarks – linkages with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals – it is important to note that 7 out of the 17 SDGs¹, which makes more than 40 % of the SDGs, have a fully environmental focus. The highly integrated approach of the SDGs means that progress on one cannot be achieved without progress on the other Goals, demonstrating once again the need to increase our efforts in addressing environmental related concerns, including as a response to ensuring a healthy, sustainable and safe environment.

Having already briefly referred to some of our activities in my earlier point, I would like to invite you to visit our OCEEA webpage at osce.org/oceea where we have drawn parallels between our activities and the respective SDGs to which our activities contribute,

Dear Colleagues,

Before concluding let me express my hope that today's webinar will provide a platform for an interactive dialogue on addressing the pandemic impact and environmental sustainability through regional co-operation and partnerships and hope that it would allow us to explore innovative ideas on how we could better assist our participating States in finding new ways and approaches to address this critical issue.

¹ [SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 7. Affordable and Clean Energy; SDG 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities; SDG 12. Responsible Consumption and Production; SDG 13. Climate Action; SDG 14. Life below Water and SDG 15. Life on Land].