

Contribution to the 2nd Preparatory Meeting of the 23rd Economic and Environmental Forum**By Ms. Daniela Scheetz, Desk Officer, Division on Climate and Environmental Foreign Policy,
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As underlined in many statements yesterday and today, water is not a topic just for hydrologists and ministries of environment. The implications of natural disasters, climate change and global population growth illustrate the importance of water issues for foreign and security policy. Floods and droughts, among others, can have very severe impacts on vulnerable and fragile states. Sea level rise leading to salinization of ground water and agricultural lands already affects small island states causing climate change refugees and is likely to affect more and bigger countries like Bangladesh in the future. I assume that it is widely acknowledged by now that the long-lasting droughts in mayor parts of Syria contributed significantly to the onset of the ongoing conflict in that country.

Serious studies predict that by 2050 55% of the world's population will be affected by water stress. Lack of comprehensive water governance can further aggravate the implications of population growth and climate change on the availability of the essential natural resource water.

Nevertheless, as already pointed out by several speakers during this conference, transboundary cooperation on water issues, underpinned by good water governance, holds the potential for many benefits for every country in a specific river basin.

These benefits include for example: security benefits – reduction of tensions between neighboring countries; environmental benefits – joint monitoring to improve water quality; economic benefits – a basin-wide perspective on infrastructure investments like dams and hydropower will guarantee that they will be constructed at the best part of the river possible as the example of the Sambezi river shows and will attract more foreign investments in general as proven by a study presented by the Secretariat of the Nile Basin Initiative at the Nile Basin Development Forum in October 2014.

In order to make full use of those benefits of transboundary water cooperation, good national water governance incorporating the principles of integrated water resource management is a prerequisite.

Water connects across sectors, people and places, it is by its nature transboundary. Almost all of the over 600 river basins worldwide are shared by two or more countries. Water policy and water governance are critical for development, including health, environment, agriculture, energy and poverty alleviation. This interrelation is described by the nexus concept.

Naturally, there is no universal solution to all water challenges worldwide. Water policies need to be tailored to the different water resources, places etc..

This principle quite well describes the underlying reasoning of the "Berlin Process", an initiative of the German government since 2008 aiming at fostering regional cooperation on water issues in Central Asia. I think the fate of the Aral Sea is well known – today, it is only a fractional size of what it once used to be. This is mainly due to an overuse of the vital resource water in the past.

Water is very unevenly distributed in the Central Asian region. The availability of water is endangered by the implications of climate change. Yet, today and for the next years to come, there are sufficient water resources in the region.

Together with our partners, UNECE and the governments of the Central Asian countries, Germany has designed a holistic approach to find a viable and equitable solution to this uneven distribution. The “Berlin Process” comprises among others institutional capacity building, technical support, a scientific network for training and exchange of experiences and a Master program on Integrated Water Resource Management at the German-Kazakh university in Almaty. Our initiative is also based on different levels – we cooperate for example with the national governments of the Central Asian states and their institutions, with subregional institutions like Basin Water Organizations and regional institutions like EC IFAS and CAREC. Our engagement is based on the principles of integrated water resource management; together with the EU and UNECE we are supporting the Central Asian states in adapting their water policies to the challenges of the 21st century.

The “Berlin Process” is a political project aimed at strengthening regional cooperation, thereby fostering regional stability and sustainable economic growth.

The issue of water, the water-energy nexus and water security has increasingly been on the agenda in the last years. Similarly, the OSCE has increased its activities in this field. The Serbian OSCE chairmanship demonstrates this very well by choosing water issues as core topic for the economic and environmental forum this year.

The OSCE activities range from disaster relief such as after the floods in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia last year to underlining the security aspect of water as in the Water Security Day in Vienna last July.

The OSCE as an organization with a long standing tradition of dealing with all aspects of security issues, including the importance of economic growth for regional stability, and a large geographical footprint is in an ideal position to act as facilitator for finding solution to the unsolved water challenges in the OSCE region. A guiding example would be the role of the OSCE in the conclusion of an agreement between Moldavia and the Ukraine on the Dnjestr river basin.

The OSCE has both the experience and the people on the ground in the field offices to make a difference.