

First GEF Biennial International Waters Conference  
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Session I. Opening Plenary: October 15, 9:00-10:00 a.m.

Address of dr. Ferenc Ligetvári,  
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Mr. El-Ashry, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address this first biennial international water conference of the Global Environment Facility which is held in Budapest. It would have been hard to find a better place for such an event than Hungary, a country whose territory is entirely situated in the middle part of the catchment area of one of the most international rivers of the world: the Danube.

Seven of the 13 Danubian countries are our neighbours, 95 % of our surface water resources originate from abroad which has to be shared and to the extent possible jointly managed with our neighbours.

Being an upstream and a downstream country as well, we have to face all the problems of international water management, the cooperation on shared river basins. Just to mention some of them: the water resources allocation, transboundary pollution prevention and control, preservation and restoration of water related ecosystems, flood- and ice hazards control and so on.

Obviously, the quantity and quality of the incoming surface waters are decisively influenced by the economic activities of the upstream countries. The same can be stated about the impact of our economic activities and water protection investments with respect to downstream countries. The protection and maintenance of the water-related ecosystems is also impossible without respect to the downstream countries.

For these reasons, well-established, efficient international cooperation is of vital importance for us, for our neighbours and actually, for all countries of the world - as we realize that the freshwater resources become one of the most valuable natural resources.

The Global Environment Facility has become one of the key institutional actors in the international environmental cooperation since the 1992 Earth Summit. It provided assistance to many developing and transition countries in all four priority areas, in particular, in relation to the implementation of global environmental conventions on climate change, biological diversity, international waters and ozone depletion.

Because of the specific conditions, Hungary pays special attention to the international collaboration in the field of sustainable water management. Today we have bilateral transboundary water agreements with all our neighbours and environmental agreements are also in place or under development. Hungary is a Party to all relevant international environmental and water conventions.

Our experience in transboundary cooperation also shows the need in improved enforcement and also in further development of the existing legal instruments. In this respect, we wish to attach high priority to survey of pollution sources, setting up common water quality objectives, elaboration and implementation of joint pollution reduction programmes, contingency plans, responsibility, liability and realization of polluter pays principle.

One of our most significant objectives is now to join the European Union, and for that purpose we should meet the environment protection requirements of the EU during the accession process. This purpose is being served also by our National Environmental Programme, which includes, as its component, the increase of the level of sewage treatment, and other water quality management measures. These contribute, beyond our domestic needs, also to the maintenance and improvement of the ecological state of the Danube and the Black Sea.

The Danube river basin cooperation is of outstanding importance for Hungary, being situated entirely on its basin. Beyond becoming party to the Danube Protection Convention, Hungary initiated a Danube basin cooperation with wider ecological approach. The conservation of the aquatic habitats and ecosystems, as well as, their restoration and reconstruction have always been priority issues for the Hungarian nature conservation.

The re-establishment of cooperation with the riparian countries of the main tributary of the Danube, the Tisza river is also of high significance for improving the environmental security of our region in order to prevent and mitigate the natural and industrial hazards, their adverse health and ecological impacts.

We are near to the bank of the river Danube that determines the life, fate, history and culture of many citizens not only of this city and our country, but also of a large part of Europe, having also influenced the relationship of nations, the peace of the region, and, unfortunately, sometimes the wars thereof, as well.

The Danube has played a significant role in our region for thousands of years both socially and economically: having its source in the West, it is a tie between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, creating a linkage between them and the South-East European countries.

During centuries, this gift of nature has been turned into a vital element of our economic life, a waterway, an energy base, a supplier of the water demand of the population, industry and agriculture, and, unfortunately, also a recipient of most of the pollution "produced" by us, people, owing to the development of civilization.

Therefore, the good quality of the Danube water is in one word, a treasure that we have to take care of. The conservation and improvement of the water quality of the river, the preservation of the ecosystems and very often, at least the restoration of the close to natural condition, is our common interest and responsibility in order to ensure the use and pleasure of a "natural" environment for the future generations.

The attainment of these goals can be primarily supported by the policy decisions and measures of the governments based on scientific and expert knowledge.

Besides that, all local and regional initiatives that are able to put broad layers of the society into the service of environment protection, also have a significant role.

Multilateral cooperation in the Danube River protection was initiated in the eighties, and represents one of the most extensive international activities focused on water protection.

The implementation of the objectives and provisions of the Danube River Protection Convention should lead to achieving the goals of sustainable water management, including: the protection and rational use of surface waters and groundwaters, reduction of hazards originating from accidents involving substances hazardous to water, floods, ice-hazards and also pollution loads of the Black Sea from sources in the Danube catchment area.

Results of previous work carried out with donor assistance are of valuable tools for the Danube Commission. Such main achievements are the Strategic Action Plan and the outputs of the Danube Pollution Reduction Programme financed from the GEF budget. The Programme for Implementation of the Strategic Action Plan was prepared as an action programme for those activities which were sponsored from international financial sources, mainly from Phare.

Donor activity contributed significantly to the establishment of the Danubian accidental warning system, the transnational monitoring network. Hotspots have also been identified and they have been translated into clear description of investment programme needs.

These tasks identified in the Strategic Action Plan and later documents are big challenges for the Danubian Countries and incorporate also their concern about the ecological conditions of the Black Sea. A cooperation mechanism has been set up and a Memorandum on Cooperation between the Black Sea and Danube Protection Commissions is being prepared.

As we are here at a conference of one supporting organization, allow me to elaborate a little on our experience in the Danube Programme.

The Danube basin cooperation development and individual countries performance improvement have been significantly supported by the international community, the international professional organizations, donor organizations and International Financing Institutions by establishing the Danube River Basin Environmental Programme.

We appreciate that the GEF joined that initiative from the beginning and is still present there.

During this nearly 9 years period, countries were given assistance for recognizing the problems, building the technical basis of planning process, creating legal and policy framework for action. We have also to stress that the achievements of the Program are joint results of the donor assistance and the significant national financial and in kind contributions.

Beyond those very important achievements we are still in need of some further institution and capacity building assistance but actions and investments are already needed to reach real improvement in the state of the environment and reduce environmental pollution.

The Hungarian Government puts lots of efforts to create the legal, institutional and financial base for it. Our new acts on water, environment and nature conservation are in force since 1995. National Environmental Programme and the related annual implementation plans are available.

In line with our approximation process to the EU, it is extraordinarily important, that environmental aspects have to be integrated into the economical and social policy of the country, into sectoral policies, regional development plans and programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Countries in our region - and I presume that in other parts of the world too - are aware of their tasks and responsibility and they are committed to take all necessary measures to protect freshwater resources and related ecosystems. Beneficiary countries are also aware of the fact the external support and funding can significantly assist them and help in establishing necessary framework and lay technical basis of further cooperation.

At the same time, their economical conditions make difficult to turn into reality the necessary measures and first of all, the investments. Pollution is usually not distributed in proportion with the economic ability of the countries to cope with it; therefore, any external support is very important to make further progress.

We are pleased that one of the four priority support areas of the Global Environment Facility is related to the international waters and that GEF keeps supporting our activities.

From our experience in the Danube river basin we can say that GEF participation in the Danube River Basin Environmental Programme from the beginning as its main donor together with the EU Phare programme - significantly facilitated the development of the Danube river basin institutional development and capacity building.

But one of the main problems of such aid programs is that how to ensure sustainability of the supported activities ? Certainly it takes time and not all the countries concerned are equally able to continue all the activities on their own. Therefore, for instance, in case of the Danube and Black Sea, we appreciate that GEF is considering with a programmatic approach to provide some further assistance to support institutional strengthening activities with the aim of reducing nutrient load to the Black sea.

We do also hope that the World Bank as one of the implementing agencies of the GEF will soon launch the investment oriented Partnership Programme, because the project portfolio has already been prepared. Other International Funding Institutions' interest is certainly also welcome.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Finally, I wish success to this meeting which is a new initiative of the GEF management. Similarly to how individual projects created fora for dialog on specific river basin or other regional water problems, this forum provides opportunity to have a look at the problem from a wider perspective and became a kind of stock exchange of ideas experiences and know-how.

The lessons learnt can facilitate the improvement of such assistance in the future. Such conference can be a kind of supplementary one to the already traditional World Water Forum. We also hope the financial institutions participating in such conferences become more concerned about water problems and keep supporting the solution of the related problems.

We look forward to hear more about the GEF and its implementing agencies' plans, about the experience gained and results of international water related projects all over the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we usually say, water is life and a limited resource in space and time. To provide the world's population with water in necessary quantity and quality is, one of the main challenges of the next century. Water knows no frontiers: as common resource it demands international cooperation.

Let's work for it together at local, regional and global level - as appropriate.

With that in mind I wish successes to this conference.

Thank you for your attention.







