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Subject: Water in the EU's external action
- Council conclusions (19 November 2021)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on water in the EU's external action, as adopted by the Council at its 3828th meeting held on 19 November 2021.

**Council Conclusions on
Water in the EU's External Action**

1. The Council highlights the strategic importance of water, in particular for sustainable development, poverty reduction, food and nutrition security, human development, climate action, environmental protection, biodiversity and ecosystem preservation, humanitarian action, and peace and stability. The Council stresses that water is essential for environmental, social, cultural and economic systems at global, regional and local level, while acknowledging the increasing anthropic pressures on the quality and quantity of water resources worldwide and that the impacts of climate change are mainly felt through water.

2. The Council recalls its conclusions of 17 June 2019, approving the EU human rights guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation. The Council underlines the importance of protecting and promoting these rights in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commitment to 'leave no one behind', and of paying particular attention to children, to persons with disabilities and to gender equality, whilst ensuring the realisation of the rights to safe drinking water and sanitation for all women and girls and their equal, inclusive, effective, and meaningful participation in this regard. As highlighted again by COVID-19, a cross sectoral collaboration between water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and health is key for successful epidemics preparedness and response. The Council also recalls its conclusions of 14 June 2021 on strengthening Team Europe's commitment to human development and emphasises the importance of the holistic One Health approach.

3. The Council reasserts that affordable access to WASH is an essential prerequisite for public health and human development and recalls that the EU remains committed to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the outcomes of their review conferences and remains committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in this context. Having that in mind, the EU reaffirms its commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. The EU further stresses the need for universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services.

4. The Council recalls its conclusions of 19 November 2018 on water diplomacy and reaffirms the EU's diplomatic engagement on water, especially transboundary water cooperation, as a tool for peace, security and stability, calling for their further implementation and increasing synergies between water, climate and energy diplomacy, as well as with biodiversity and food and nutrition security. The Council welcomes activities of the Member States to support transboundary water cooperation in different regional contexts through their water management and water diplomacy activities.

5. The Council stresses the need to address water issues as an integral element of conflict prevention, resolution and stabilisation, including through capacity building, notably as regards mediation. For this, the Council emphasises the need to develop and use all necessary water risk mapping tools, early warning systems, the required expertise and disaster risk reduction and management built on conflict sensitive, gender-responsive and human rights-based approaches. As cooperation on water issues, especially in a transboundary context, provides an opportunity for measures conducive to peace, it is important to factor in water-related risks and indicators into conflict analysis and programming in fragile states and conflict-affected areas, as well as into the design and deployment of CSDP missions to conflict theatres.

6. The Council is concerned that according to the latest status report by UN-Water, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 - 'Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' remains severely off-track and under-financed. Therefore, the Council calls for further enhancing of the water dimension in the EU's external action and the United Nations (UN) agendas in line with the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework. Due to its relevance for all SDGs, water is critical for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as for other international agreements and commitments, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the New Urban Agenda, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Convention on Combatting Desertification and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). The Council acknowledges the high value of the tools developed under the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) including the UNECE/WHO Protocol on Water and Health for the setting of national targets for the implementation of water-related SDGs and its practical guidance on assessing the situation with regard to equitable access to water and sanitation.

7. The Council underlines the need to strengthen multilateralism and dialogue on water, with the UN at its core, including by supporting the implementation of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework and the establishment of a new UN special envoy for water; further it highlights the importance of effective coordination and coherence of the UN's work on water, notably through strengthening UN-Water.

8. The Council welcomes the UN 2023 Water Conference as an opportunity to mobilise all stakeholders and sectors and further catalyse political momentum on water with one EU voice and a pro-active stance. The Council calls for concrete outcomes of the conference with the aim of accelerating the achievement of water-related goals and targets and getting SDG 6 back on track. The Council welcomes the outcomes of the 2021 PGA High-Level meeting in New York and supports the key messages and recommendations of the 2021 Bonn Water Dialogues for Results and looks forward to the upcoming conferences on water contributing to the preparation of the 2023 Water Conference, recalling Member States' contribution to the process by hosting some of these conferences. There is an urgent need globally for more inclusivity, concrete actions and commitments within cross-sectoral approaches in order to achieve water-related targets and goals. The Council considers that the EU and its Members States should develop common objectives and positions in light of the 2023 Water Conference.

9. The Council stresses the importance for the EU and its Members States of giving more attention to water in political dialogues, at local, regional and multilateral level, in intergovernmental processes and international fora, including those on climate change, biodiversity, environment, food systems, energy, health, human development and oceans. To this end, the Council highlights the importance of regular dialogues with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, with a particular focus on the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups and on locally-led approaches, as well as on the protection of human rights defenders, including environmental human rights defenders.

10. The Council calls on all members of Team Europe to address gaps in the water sector, including financing, governance and capacity; and to commonly share EU standards, know-how, experiences, and resources. In this regard, the Council reaffirms the need to accelerate research and innovation, data and knowledge sharing, while supporting the transition to digital water solutions, including through engaging in capacity building.

11. The Council, recalling the need to close the water financing gap, welcomes efforts to mobilise innovative and inclusive finance from public and private, as well as international and domestic sources. The Council stresses the importance of ensuring that water and sanitation issues are mainstreamed in discussions on financing for development (FfD) and the implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA). The Council supports the development of EU sustainable finance and stresses the need for balanced investments in water management, water access and in sanitation and hygiene, in both rural and urban areas, including as part of health and education systems, as well as in humanitarian settings, improving water quality and strengthening climate resilience, reinforcing transboundary water cooperation and respecting gender equality, human rights and sustainability standards. The Council acknowledges the impacts of inadequate sanitation services and wastewater treatment on water quality, biodiversity, human health and dignity. The Council calls for the promotion of efficient and sustainable use of water as a priority in all sectors, whenever possible.
12. The Council emphasises the importance of water governance and the role of integrated water resource management (IWRM) as the core process that promotes the coordinated development and sustainable management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems. The Council reiterates the importance of the water-food-energy-ecosystem nexus in addressing synergies and trade-offs on water across the EU's external action.
13. The Council highlights the importance of IWRM in strengthening the resilience of societies across all socio-economic backgrounds and ecosystems, to deal with natural hazards and to reduce all risks driven by water-related disasters and extreme events as well as slow onset events like sea level rise. Moreover, IWRM systems and infrastructures, including ones related to WASH, should be more resilient and climate neutral. The Council stresses that water actions need to be better integrated into the EU's external action and finance in the field of climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as through the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and preparedness. The Council calls for an improved inclusion and alignment of water actions, including WASH, with national climate strategies and plans under the UNFCCC and a stronger focus on transboundary and regional cooperation on water and climate issues.

14. The Council emphasises the essential role of conserving and restoring aquatic ecosystems, notably wetlands, to foster human development, to protect biological diversity, to reduce water pollution, and to enhance climate action in line with the European Green Deal and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The Council underlines the relevance of nature-based solutions, IWRM, source-to-sea and cross-sectoral approaches, integrated coastal zone management, circular economy principles, and building-back-greener strategies. The Council also recognises that the UN Human Rights Council of 23 March 2021, in the adoption of the resolution on human rights and the environment, takes note of the recommendations that all states should implement a human rights-based approach in water governance and that balancing human needs for water, while ensuring human rights fulfilment, with the health of aquatic ecosystems is one of the key challenges of the twenty-first century.
15. The Council stresses that disability-inclusive and transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality are key to ensuring that everybody benefits from and is empowered by access to affordable WASH services. The Council also calls for improvement of the analysis and understanding of the gender-differentiated impacts of water interventions, to inform gender-responsive policies and actions.
16. Regarding the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus, the Council reaffirms the need for more complementarity between humanitarian, development and peace actions to support the safety and security of water resources, water personnel - in particular sanitation workers - and water infrastructure through advocating for compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHRL) and international labour rights. The Council calls for enhancing the protection of humanitarian workers delivering lifesaving assistance and critical infrastructures against any type of adverse events, be they natural, accidental or deliberate. The Council calls for strengthening related multi-stakeholder processes and analysis to improve evidence, policy and implementation of interventions, thereby enabling humanitarian, development and peace actors to collaborate better along the nexus to address urgent needs and to intervene earlier to address root causes and prevent the onset of humanitarian water and sanitation crises.

17. The Council reiterates the importance of regional integration actions, calls for the promotion of transboundary and regional water cooperation, including on aquifers, as a key driver of sustainable development, green transition and peace, and calls for a renewed coordinated push on the importance of accession and adherence to UN water conventions, transboundary agreements and institutional frameworks.
