

United Nations Water Conference holding from March 22 – 24, 2023 in New York

Theme: Integrative Highland to Ocean (H2O) Action for Disappearing Deltas: Towards a UN Convention on Conserving River Deltas

Venue: United Nations (UN) Headquarter, Side Event Room A

Date: Thursday, March 23, 2023

Time: 12:30 pm – 13:45pm, New York Time

CONCEPT NOTE

Introduction

Climate change induced variability in the distribution of water poses complex human and environmental security challenges in both developed and developing countries. Increasingly evident are changes in seasonal and sub-seasonal weather variability and extremes that resulted in significant losses of productive agricultural lands, ecosystems, and biodiversity – which are means of wellbeing and livelihood for many rural people and local communities. Consequently, this is seriously threatening both social and ecological existence in many ways, including deteriorating food production systems, increasing food shortages, expanding water conflicts and growing populations of climate refugees. Effective, integrative policies are needed to inhibit further climate change, as well as adapt to the climate change otherwise many nations will not be able to have the water resources their populations will need or want.

The growing impact of climate change on water resources will continue to top global discuss – as the main driver and cause of most water-related challenges across the globe leading to human migration especially among young people, to poverty, hunger and communal conflicts as well as to new disease outbreaks. The foregoing has serious implications for the future peaceful coexistence of sub-Sahara Africa (SSA), South Asian and South-East Asian countries with shared trans-boundary water resources, Sadly, indigenous peoples and local communities especially women, young people and the elderly – remain the most vulnerable and mostly affected by these impacts.

Here, we focus on two specific water-related concerns: (1) Ocean-facing River deltas confronted by sea level rise and salt water intrusion and (2) Melting glaciers in highlands leading to streamflow variability in lowlands and deltas of river basins.

For example, West Africa's Niger River Delta Region, like other deltas around the globe, have several reports about its gradual disappearance as a result of morphological changes due to natural processes accentuated by human activities such as deforestation, mangrove destruction, dredging, land development, oil and gas exploitation, agriculture and greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, the growing evidence of environmental changes, the creeping and sometimes pronounced demographic-related changes in the ecosystems are mostly due to sea level rise, storm surges, coastal erosion, and human-induced ecosystem degradation. These incidences have resulted in loss of lives, livelihoods and ecosystems with dynamic alterations in their characteristics, structure and function. However, this disparaging narrative and phenomenon is not peculiar to one region, but to just about every coastal state around the globe.

In a stable climate, highlanders and lowlanders have their own places: highlanders have their specific high-altitude climate regimes and ecosystems and lowlanders have theirs. Each population has adjusted its human and societal activities within the constraints of temperature, rainfall and other sub-regional climate characteristics. Today, the global to local climates are warming at an accelerated, anthropologically enhanced rates, in large measure because of increased greenhouse gas emissions and tropical deforestation. The underlying causes of those two factors alone result from the pressures on governments and local communities for enhancing economic development prospects and their associated increases in wellbeing as well as for reducing poverty.

Warming of the atmosphere will have consequences that will worsen existing societal and environmental problems. Deltas provides the habitats for more than half a billion people and thousands of species, supporting fishery resources, forest products and agriculture, and providing food for billions and livelihoods for millions of people worldwide and will be lost – if nothing is done to address the underlying challenges through partnership, greater UN recognition, and closer attention for deltas to ensure their sustainability.

We are hopeful this dialogue will help individual and regional governments and the United Nations (UN) to better understand the concerns of the highlands to lowlands watercourses (corridors) and river deltas' communities worldwide, to steer their interest on the need to scale-up climate ambitions, with a foreseeable UN recognition of the World's river deltas and other low-lying coastal areas through a convention or some sort of special recognition to be called DeltaUNITE.

Participating in the UN Water Conference, we hope to expand conversations that were started at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh and the Cairo Water Week (Egypt) to build on international alliances to achieve the above objectives. While hoping to achieve a UN-sanctioned River Delta Convention modeled after the UNCCD (the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification), which provides a structure, status, and UN high-level recognition of their place-based peculiarities and challenges. In this regard, we are seeking to achieve the recognition of the ecological, environmental, socio-economic and cultural sustainability of deltas and their communities.

ACCARD (African Centre for Climate Actions and Rural Development Initiative) in collaboration with the Nigeria's Bayelsa State Government, the Institute for Environmental Diplomacy and Security at the University of Vermont, the Center for Capacity Building at the University of Colorado, among others, is playing a pivotal role in stimulating the River Delta coastal states and communities, community actors, African research institutions and particularly highlands to ocean communities, to build an international multi-stakeholder alliance to amplify this global conversation.

The conversation will hopefully and importantly highlight the urgent need for multilevel and multifaceted cooperative action, among indigenous peoples, local communities and civil society, including young professionals. Youth and children also have roles to play, from learning and awareness raising to addressing and responding to climate change impacts. In Africa and Asia, many countries still lack access to clean, safe potable water due to poor infrastructure and a lack of investment in the sector, groundwater degradation, pollution, salinization and negative fisheries subsidies as well as flooding. Indigenous peoples and local communities are not only affected but are among the most vulnerable to the growing adverse consequences of climate change on water resource.

Justification

There are chronic, emerging challenges each with its own set of cascading (2nd and 3rd order impacts, e.g. ripple effects) involving water issues across the globe especially in developing nations.

For example, the flooding in both highlands and lowlands tends to have devastating impacts on food production, housing, clean drinking water supply and infrastructure everywhere, but these impacts are more pronounced across Asia and Africa due to poor infrastructure development and response strategies in place. The recent climate induced flooding that devastated communities in Nigeria and Pakistan demonstrate the complexity of cascading impacts of flood waters on social and environmental systems. Conversely, climate change induced droughts lead to less water availability for food and energy production in vulnerable countries. Droughts also reduce environmental flows from highlands to lowlands, effectively causing the death of rivers and enabling saltwater intrusion in river deltas due to sea level rise.

Huge financial and human resources are therefore required to clean up the present damages as well as to prepare for and respond to the likelihood of similar occurrences in future decades. Industrialized countries are neither immune from the adverse impacts of a variable and changing climate. For example, the estimated \$1.5 billion USD to fix damaged railways and network in Germany alone surpasses the total (fiscal and recurrent) annual national budget of many developing countries. The situation will be worse in developing countries and in the future due to the poor social infrastructure and ineffective disaster response management in place.

It is therefore imperative to increase the participation of indigenous people and rural community particularly, local stakeholders and leaders from the region in global discussion, negotiation and policy development as well as scientific data gathering to accelerate the integrated development of water sector at all levels, consistent with United Nations Katowice recommendations which provides for a bottom-up approach to climate change governance and grassroot participation in governance.

In the light of the foregoing, and to importantly reduce the vulnerability of communities in river deltas with integrative H₂O water governance in transboundary river basins, as well as providing voice to river deltas in global water dialogues, we are proposing this side event at the 2023 UN Water conference to achieve the following objectives.

The objectives of the conference are to;

- (i) Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity among delta communities and water stakeholders to climate-related hazards and natural disasters through increased knowledge sharing, partnerships, global attention, UN recognition, and community participation.
- (ii) Build a regional to global stakeholder's dialogue not only to identify but to also proffer integrative Highlands to Oceans (H₂O) solutions to growing water-related challenges particularly those potentiated by climate change.
- (iii) Enhance the local capacity of countries through training and capacity building including on community data gathering and community-based context sensitive solutions to these complex problems.

Outcomes of the Meeting

- i. Increase local to regional and continental collaboration as a “game changer” in water resource development and management from highlands to lowlands with special emphasis on the plight of river deltas and low-lying coastal areas

Key topics of discussion

1. Understand the causes and consequences of global climate change on integrated water resources management
2. Challenges, policy deficit and investment opportunities in the countries spanning transboundary Niger, Indus and Mekong river deltas with a focus on Nigeria, Pakistan and Vietnam
3. Policies, collaboration including academic and community support in integrated water resource protection and development.
4. Regional, continental and global benefits from the conservation and protection of river deltas.
5. Identify areas for capacity building and science knowledge development for gathering social-scientific data and identifying community centric solutions.

Target Audience:

Country presidents (present and virtual), Ministers for Water resources and Environment, country representatives, International governmental and Non-governmental Organisations, Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), Youth and Women Groups, private sector, civil society organization, local & international developmental organizations, youths, multilateral institutions, journalists, etc

Proposed Speakers/panelists:

1. Dr. Aboje Andrews, Environmental Specialist and Consultant with African Development Bank (AfDB)
2. Prof. Michael Glantz, Director, University of Colorado Consortium for Capacity Building
3. Prof. Asim Zia, Director, Institute for Environmental Diplomacy and Security, University of Vermont, United States (In person)
4. Senator Nisar Memon, Director, Water Environment Forum, Pakistan (virtual)
5. Prof. Bach Tan Sinh, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam (virtual)
6. Susan Sgorbati, Director, Center for Advancement of Public Action, Bennington College, VT USA (in person)
7. Gender Expert, African Centre for Climate Actions and Rural Development (ACCARD)

Expected Result

- Promote environmental protection and sustainability of water resources
- Enhance indigenous and local people participation water resources governance including in data gathering.
- Promote gender particularly young people and women in global water dialogue, planning and development.
- Achieve regional to global collaboration for the protection of highlands to lowlands communities
- United nations recognition and status for Deltas, globally.

Institutional Side Event Organizers:

- African Centre for Climate Actions and Rural Development (ACCARD) Initiative
- Bayelsa State Government and Bayelsa State Ministry of Environment
- University of Vermont
- University of Colorado, Consortium for Capacity Building (CCB)
- Transboundary Water In-Cooperation Network (TWIN)
- Akassa Development Foundation
- Water Environment Forum, Pakistan
- Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam
- Centre for Environment and Sustainable Livelihood projects (CESLP)
- Institute of Environmental Diplomacy and Security (IEDS)

Event slogan: “we don't need fireworks to celebrate the future. we need water”

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