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Sustainable Development Tisza River Basin

The basin of the River Tisza provides a living space for 15 million inhabitants. This is the reason why I find this civil project more than important and I hope that the concerned governments will be able to find the legal means by which they can support this programme.



Background

1. The Tisza River Basin (TRB) is **the largest area among the 15 sub-basins of the Danube**, and the Tisza is the major river draining the Carpathian Mountains. Five countries share the 157,200 square kilometres of the TRB: Hungary, Romania, Serbia & Montenegro, Slovakia and Ukraine, and 14,400,000 inhabitants call the TRB their home.
2. Generally, the TRB has **well-preserved traditional rural landscapes, vast complexes of forested areas, and viable populations of many species that are no longer found in Western Europe**. The river basin can also be characterized as including pollution hotspots, declining heavy industries, a lack of economic development, high levels of unemployment, and emerging patterns of regular flooding and social and ethnic tensions exacerbated by the widely varying courses of transition in the countries.
3. In recent years, the TRB has been at **the forefront of international attention** due to a sequence of major flood events and environmental disasters with the Baia Mare cyanide spill leading the headlines. Following the Baia Mare spill, the European Commission established the „Baia Mare Task Force” in order to access the reasons for the disaster and to recommend possible future actions. The Task Force found that the response to the cyanide spill was a positive example of cooperation among the countries.
4. This atmosphere of cooperation provided an opportunity for **a regional integrated programme for the sustainable development of the river basin** to create jobs and improve the well-being of the population living in the TRB, and minimize the risk of future accidents and natural disasters. UNDP is ready to take a lead in this area and using our competitive advantages make it operation.

Key driving forces and reasons behind regional integrated approach:

1. **EU Accession** – the **adoption at EU level of the Water Framework Directive** and the existence of a comprehensive water management legal framework at international and regional level has a key influence on the Tisza countries. Even if the Tisza riparian countries are quite diverse in terms of their positioning towards EU, and only

Hungary, Romania and Slovakia have the legal obligation of complying with the EU acquis, including the Water Framework Directive, both Serbia and Montenegro and Ukraine use the EU environmental legislation as a key reference in the process of developing their national water policies.

2. **Damaging Accidents** – another driving force for defining water policies in the Tisza countries is the need for **international cooperation for the management of transboundary river bodies**. The Baia Mare Cyanide Spill revealed on one hand the need for enhanced cooperation for sustainable water management of transboundary water bodies and on the other hand the need of alignment of the countries to the international and European standards, for prevention of similar accidents. Only regional cooperation can ensure that this type of accidents won't repeat again.
3. **Growing international cooperation – the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians**, signed by the Carpathian countries during the Kiev Conference (May 2003) through its provisions related to sustainable and integrated water/river basin management will become with its entry into the Tisza countries, given the fact that Carpathian Convention territorial applicability includes to a large extent the Tisza River Basin. Also during the negotiation process, the countries have showed great commitment towards implementation of the Convention.

Situational analysis – where we stand now on the national levels (based on UNDP studies)

4. **Water management planning** – all countries, besides Serbia and Montenegro and to a less extent Ukraine have developed specific comprehensive water management policies, based on the principles of the Water Framework Directive. – In Hungary, Romania and Slovakia a series of **specific water management planning documents** have been developed, even if at very different timing and it is not very sure whether all these documents are coordinated among each other. These documents set the policy guidelines for different aspects of water management, such as water quality or quantity, planning of infrastructure developments etc. In Serbia and Montenegro and Ukraine still there is need for further work for development of these specific plans and programmes.
5. **Implementation and enforcement** of water legislation varies in the 5 countries, also depending on the existence of the appropriate legal frameworks. Thus, most of the relevant laws are either recently adopted or are in the process of development therefore there is little experience on implementation of water management legislation, which would allow for a better identification of bottlenecks in implementation. None of the countries has reached a satisfactory level of ensuring enforcement of relevant laws and the experience in enforcement is rather limited.
6. **Institutional Framework** for sustainable water management is mainly characterized by conflicting responsibilities. This seems to be a common issue for all countries – under the present regulatory framework the responsibilities on the different aspects of water management are split among several authorities, which leads to difficulties in implementation. Because most institutions are limited in the tasks they can carry out (see obstacles), and because their domestic duties are formal requirements, international cooperation becomes a lesser priority.
7. A key element towards effective transboundary cooperation is the **political commitment** of all Tisza countries to the process. This is very important, taking into account the different interests for water use in the Tisza countries, generated mainly

by different levels economic development and also the geographic conditions. The political commitment towards transboundary cooperation for sustainable management of the Tisza River Basin is also subject to the internal economic and social development pressures related to conflicting challenges and interests in water management in 5 countries.

One could conclude that all the pieces are in place, however there is a significant gap between the principles promoted through policy documents and framework legislation and the real practice at the level of implementation and enforcement. In addition, majority of the issues is of cross-boarder/regional nature and cannot be addressed on the national level.

Key obstacles of sustainable development and integrated management of Tisza River Basin:

8. **Five countries at the different levels of development.** The Tisza is relatively large basin with countries at very different levels of development, especially with regards to EU Accession (Hungary and Slovakia new members, Romania candidate, Serbia and Montenegro, Ukraine outside EU framework).
9. **Obstacles deriving from the legislative framework.** Process of developing legislation that sometimes is not supported by prior preparatory work, which would avoid later on problems in implementation and enforcement. Legislation of Ukraine and Republic of Serbia still need incorporate the river basin management approach to the water management. The enforcement of the law, existing corruption and low legislative and environmental awareness, ignorance of legislation and the neglect of breaches of regulations by responsible bodies are major problems.
10. **Lack of assessment of the environmental and economic efficiency** of water protection measures, leads to difficulties in enforcement whenever implementation fails.
11. Difference between the objectives set by national policies (among which transboundary cooperation) and **lacking concrete implementation.**
12. **Low priority given** to environmental protection and sustainable development on government and society, lack of all types of funds at all institutions, lack of public awareness about water issues and capacity to organize and demand adequate services from institutions.
13. And last but not least, **lack of political commitment** on the sides of national government and **lack of leadership** on the side of international organizations.

Way ahead:

UNDP is committed to change this situation. The above-mentioned obstacles can be overcome. However **a holistic regional approach/strategy** to achieve sustainable development and integrated management of the Tisza River is needed focusing on the following areas:

- Looking at integrated management of Tisza River Basin not only through the water management and natural or industrial disasters lens, but incorporating also **economic and social aspects** of sustainable development and integrated management. We have to address the root causes not to cure the syndromes and use the natural and human resources to initiate development of in many cased deprived regions.

- Ensuring **coordination** of all activities undertaken in the Tisza River Basin. The country assessment realized by UNDP have identified a wide range of projects focused on the Tisza River Basin that are often not coordinated, inefficient, with limited results. We need to plan and implement the initiatives in more programmatic manner, having clear priorities and objectives in mind.
- There is enormous of expertise and lessons learned accumulated already now – **countries should learn from each other**, especially from those, which have more experience with setting up the institutional and policy framework required by the EU, but also in the area of regional and local development. International cooperation mechanism should provide technical support to non-EU countries. Trans-boundary cooperation and coordination among all countries should concentrate on the following priority areas:
 - i. Support to integration of sustainable water management concerns into sectoral policies, e.g. agriculture, forestry, industrial development and others;
 - ii. Support to development of priority regional and local development initiatives (especially cross-border pilot initiatives focusing on economic activities, sustainable income generation, vulnerable groups, inter-ethnic cooperation, etc.);
 - iii. Support to local municipalities and other local stakeholders in accessing additional funding (especially from the European Union);
 - iv. Support for transportation and implementation of the Water Framework Directive, especially provisions related to institutional arrangements, public participation, cost-recovery principle, and integrated river basin planning and management;
 - v. Transfer of experience from the EU new members to other countries.
 - vi. Identification of best practice of cross-border cooperation and development of projects based on successful experience.
- Countries have to use the successful example of **trans-boundary cooperation** on flood prevention, management and control issues within the Tisza Basin Forum as a model for trans-boundary cooperation for other aspects of development and water management.

Conclusion:

In order to achieve these ambitious goals – we need **holistic regional approach**, and UNDP offers to lead a **coalition of partners** including national governments, international organizations and donors, municipalities, NGOs etc. – already now we are developing a strong partnership with the Carpathian Foundation – to work on these issues.

UNDP has been active in this area for several years implementing projects and providing policy advice in the areas of sustainable development, environmental protection and water management, economic development and poverty reduction, public administration reform, local development and many others. We are present in all the countries working closely with the governments, but also other partners including municipalities and civil society.

Based on the above mentioned, we suggest to:

1. to develop **on overall strategy for integrated management** of the Tisza River Basin (i.) defining a framework for regional cooperation and (ii.) identifying the key priorities and activities in terms of policy, legal and institutional framework development;
2. to identify **the key – preferably cross-border – pilot initiatives** to test progressive approaches, but also link water management and natural disaster prevention with economic development, job creation and income generation; these initiatives could be focused on vulnerable groups, especially Roma and disadvantaged regions – here UNDP would link in with its Roma and sustainable income generation related activities;
3. to initiate **practical implementation** of selected initiatives;
4. through **an international conference** on Tisza River Basin (e. g. Tisza boating next year?), to present the strategy as well as targeted initiatives (with some preliminary results) to broader donor community, governments and other partners to create a **coalition** for sustainable development and integrated management of Tisza River.

However committed, UNDP needs strong partners on the Tisza River issues, and we believe that our approach will attract these partners.