Ministerial Dialogue: From Geneva to Riyadh and beyond. Enhancing global and national policy instruments for proactive drought management

Main Committee room 15:00-18:00, 2 December 2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Your Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished delegates,

It is my great pleasure and honor to express my compliment on behalf of the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia and in my own name, and above all I would like to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Secretariat of the UNCCD for organizing this significant Conference. We came together with a shared mission to ensure a livable and sustainable future for our communities and our planet.

Republic of Serbia is very exposed to climate change. In the period from 2000 to 2020 Serbia has endured over €6.8 billion in damage and losses from extreme weather events, with droughts and extreme heat accounting for more than 70% of this devastation. According to current estimates, temperature increase in the Republic of Serbia is more pronounced and faster compared to the global average. We are all aware of the fact that the mean global temperature increased by 1.1 degree Celsius compared to the preindustrial level; however, the average temperature increase in the Republic of Serbia has already reached 1.8 degrees increase, and in the tremendous 2.6 degrees Celsius. At the same time, climate projections indicate that if we continue business as usual, by the end of the century, we can expect an increase in the average temperature up to 5.8 degrees Celsius, a cataclysm of a kind that threatens our economic and social fabric.

Due to droughts, some cities during this year were left without sufficient water for the public water supply, which is an additional growing climate change risk.

Guided by science, our Ministry has developed the **Climate Change Adaptation Programme for the period 2023-2030**, which was adopted last year. Adaptation Programme provides climate risk and vulnerability assessment and proposes medium and long-term adaptation policies and measures in the most vulnerable sectors, such as agriculture, water management, forestry, urban development, energy, infrastructure and human health.

Especially devastating damages and losses caused by the impacts of climate change were observed in the agricultural and forestry sector. In just two years of extremely hot and dry weather conditions (2012 and 2017), losses and damages in agriculture were estimated at around 3.5 billion USD. Assessments have shown that the already observed climate risks will increase, but that new climate risks will also appear due to climate change. Therefore, the increase in the threat of agricultural production due to climate change will inevitably grow, in the coming decades, and it is necessary to ensure the reduction of damages and losses.

From 2019 to the spring of 2022, the Forestry Directorate had used subsidy funds to finance the afforestation on the area where the adverse impacts of climate change had been recorded due to long-term drought and extreme temperatures, and after one vegetation period, more than a half of the forested areas dried up already during the first year. This result indicates the need for a different approach in the forestry interventions planning and implementation, considering the climate change impact assessments for forest species, and for other components of the climate system that enable the survival of the selected species.

The increased drought frequency and intensity has been recognized in various sectors and it affects the yield quality and quantity, the forest ecosystems survival and development, water availability, road infrastructure, etc. Therefore, integrating drought as a multidimensional climate hazard in the system for monitoring, timely alerts and impact assessment, including loss and damage is one of the crucial adaptation measures is urgently needed in our country. As the first step toward it, in the Adaptation Program is prescribed the development of a Methodology for Drought Monitoring (as a multidimensional climate hazard) of importance for all relevant sectors in the Republic of Serbia, taking into account all aspects of drought climate hazard (meteorological, hydrological, soil related, physiological, etc.), from long-term to short-term.

Additionally, Ministry of Environmental Protection has created and launched on its website the web-portal **Digital Climate Atlas of Serbia** that contains all the relevant climate data for climate change and impact assessment for adaptation planning purposes, from the national to the local level. It also contains the observed and projected drought indicators, with the easy data viewing and downloading options.

Ministry of Environmental Protection has also developed the **publication "Soil Degradation and Climate Change in Serbia"** that has showed that the risk of soil degradation in Serbia is continually increasing due to climate change. Soil degradation is currently dominantly driven by human factors (land conversion, abandonment of agricultural fields, overexploitation of soil in agriculture), so the effects of climate change tend to exacerbate the degradation process and trigger and/or accelerate the degradation of natural systems.

According to this study, the **risk of desertification** considering only the climate factor: in the recent climate period (2001–2020) 36% of the territory of Serbia was at moderate risk and in the 2041–2060 period 53% of the territory will be at moderate risk and 30% at high risk. The risk of **soil degradation** considering climate and land-related degradation factors (aridity/water availability, extreme precipitation, soil and vegetation vulnerability without surfaces under managed soils, and terrain features): in the 2001–2020 period, 29% of the territory of Serbia was at moderate and 28% at higher risk levels (14% at very and extremely high risk levels), and in the 2041–2060 period 52% will be at moderate and 42% at high risk levels (25% at very and extremely high risk levels).

However, we must strive to better integrate adaptation into national/local legal frameworks as well as to enhance capacities of local communities together with awareness-raising and finding ways to provide technical and financial assistance to local authorities.

At the end, it is my special pleasure to emphasize gratitude to the Secretariat of the Convention for their support and efforts for addressing drought in our country as well, bearing in mind that vulnerabilities and risks of drought and aridity and other climate hazards are increasing in our country due to climate change, contributing to increased risks of desertification and land degradation. Allow me to express my hope that the successful cooperation will continue in the future and that I am convinced that this Conference will significantly contribute to joint efforts aimed at reaching the overall goals.