



## XI PROGRESS ON TRANSBOUNDARY WATER COOPERATION –

### Executive summary

2021 Transboundary waters account for 60 per cent of the world’s freshwater flows and 153 countries have territory within at least one of the 286 transboundary river and lake basins and 592 transboundary aquifer systems. Cooperation over these waters offers multiple benefits and contributes not only to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (water and sanitation for all), but many other SDGs, including those related to poverty alleviation (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), health and well-being (SDG 3), clean energy (SDG 7), climate change (SDG 13), ecosystem protection (SDG 14 and 15), as well as peace and security (SDG 16). The COVID-19 crisis has provided an important reminder of the links between transboundary water cooperation and health, while also offering an opportunity to ensure that the post-COVID-19 recovery capitalizes upon the catalytic role that such cooperation can play in advancing the SDGs. In addition, increasing climate change impacts on transboundary basins call for joint action, which can make adaptation more effective.

SDG target 6.5 calls for the implementation of integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate, by 2030. Advancing transboundary water cooperation through the accelerated adoption of

operational arrangements between countries can contribute significantly to the United Nations Decade of Action and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework. However, this will require a major effort. The first SDG indicator 6.5.2 report in 2018 considered this need for accelerated action and highlighted some of the means by which to achieve it. This second SDG indicator 6.5.2 report provides an opportunity

i) to re-iterate this need, based on improvements both in the quality and coverage of data, and

ii) to refine the call for accelerated action, especially in light of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

Despite COVID-19, countries have responded extremely positively to the second monitoring exercise, with 129 out of 153 countries sharing transboundary waters submitting reports to the 2020 exercise, compared with 107 in 2017.

Country engagement in regional workshops (both face-to-face and online) organized by the custodian agencies (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) and partners between 2018 and 2020, as well as supporting guidance material, strengthened the monitoring exercise.

This high level of investment in the monitoring exercise is an important outcome in itself, which in turn has enhanced countries' reporting capacity and helped address data gaps. Particularly in relation to transboundary aquifer data, the SDG indicator 6.5.2 monitoring exercise has assisted countries to begin to assess data gaps, and the actions required to address them. Countries have also reported positive experiences of how the SDG indicator 6.5.2 monitoring exercise has triggered both in-country and intercountry dialogues on transboundary water cooperation. While these developments are encouraging, significant data gaps still remain, particularly in relation to transboundary aquifers. Also, a side effect of improvements in the quality of reporting is that the SDG 6.5.2 indicator value for a particular country may have changed between the first and the second monitoring exercise not because of progress "on the ground", but rather due to more accurate data.

By combining data from 2017 and 2020, it is possible to calculate the indicator for 101 of the 153 countries that share transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers. These data show that the global average of the indicator value (percentage of transboundary basin area in a country covered by an operational arrangement) is 58 per cent. Thirty-two countries

now report having 90 per cent or more of their transboundary basin area covered by operational arrangements (compared with 22 in 2017).

Only 24 of those countries report having met the target of having all of their transboundary basins covered (compared with 17 in 2017).

In relation to river and lake basins, Europe and North America show the fullest coverage of operational arrangements, with 27 out of 42 countries reporting that operational arrangements cover 90 per cent or more of their transboundary river and lake basin area. This is followed by sub-Saharan Africa, where 18 of 42 countries reported that 90 per cent or more of their transboundary river and lake basin area is covered by operational arrangements. For Central, Eastern, Southern and South-Eastern Asia combined, only six countries out of 15 have 90 per cent or more of their basin area covered by operational arrangements, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean where only four out of 22 countries have 90 per cent or more of their basin area covered by operational arrangements. Finally, in the North Africa and Western Asia region, only one out of 17 countries reported having 90 per cent or more of its basin area covered by operational arrangements.

The situation in Europe and North America is also the most advanced for transboundary aquifers, with 24 out of 36 countries sharing transboundary aquifers reporting that operational arrangements cover 70 per cent or more of their transboundary aquifer area. However, for most countries in Central, Eastern, Southern and South-Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Northern Africa and Western Asia, despite the importance of groundwater within the arid and semi-arid climates found in large parts of these regions, operational arrangements cover only 30 per cent or less of their transboundary aquifer area. Sub-Saharan Africa presents a more intermediate situation, although the majority of countries still report that operational arrangements for transboundary aquifers are lacking, or they have reported difficulties in obtaining the requisite aquifer data.

In addition to producing the SDG indicator value data, the second SDG indicator 6.5.2 monitoring exercise has offered an important opportunity for countries to report on a lot of activities undertaken to advance transboundary water cooperation, and to show innovative ways in which they have been able to accelerate cooperation. In this regard, the SDG indicator 6.5.2 monitoring exercise has revealed progress both in terms of the adoption of around 20 arrangements between 2017 and 2020, and the reinvigoration of other arrangements to make them operational.

Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on the Syr Darya, between Mozambique and Zimbabwe on the Buzi River Basin, and between Botswana, Namibia and South Africa on the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer highlights that sometimes countries can take relatively straightforward steps to trigger cooperation and accelerate progress towards ensuring that operational arrangements cover all their transboundary basins. Key components in support of these steps include financing, capacity development, political will, and data collection and exchange. The United Nations and its partners have an important role to play in supporting this accelerated progress through the leveraging, mobilization and coordination of expertise related to transboundary water cooperation

# KEY MESSAGES FROM XV PROGRESS ON TRANSBOUNDARY WATER COOPERATION – 2021 REPORT

- Transboundary waters account for 60 per cent of the world’s freshwater flows and 153 countries have territory within at least one of the 286 transboundary river and lake basins and 592 transboundary aquifer systems. Cooperation over these waters offers multiple benefits and is an important contributor to many SDGs.
  - 129 out of 153 countries sharing transboundary basins (rivers, lakes and aquifers) submitted reports, compared with 107 in 2017. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, this shows that countries have responded extremely positively to the second monitoring exercise, which is in itself a positive sign of country commitment to transboundary water cooperation at the global level. Greater engagement has improved data quality.
  - **However, only 32 countries have 90 per cent or more of their transboundary basin area covered by operational arrangements**, of which only 24 countries have all of their basin area covered. (Based on 101 of the 153 countries sharing transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers having on average 58 per cent of their basin area covered by operational arrangements (figure based on combined data from 2017 and 2020). Ensuring that operational arrangements cover all transboundary basins by 2030 will therefore require a significant acceleration in effort.
- In line with the United Nations Decade of Action (United Nations General Assembly, 2019) and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (UN-Water, 2020a), efforts should focus on a number of key acceleration areas, including:
    - addressing data gaps, especially in relation to the coverage and dynamics of transboundary aquifers, as a trigger for sustained cooperation
    - upscaling capacity development as a critical precursor to the negotiation and implementation of operational arrangements for transboundary water cooperation
    - capitalizing on the global water conventions and draft articles on the law of transboundary aquifers as a basis upon which to develop new arrangements or revise existing ones at the basin or subbasin level

- mobilizing political will for transboundary water cooperation by coupling it with other critical issues related to sustainability, climate change, poverty alleviation and peace

