

High-Level Event

The Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea Region: Advancing Regional and International Cooperation Towards Comprehensive Strategies in Support of Sustainable Development

Governments of Japan, Nigeria, Norway and Uzbekistan in cooperation with the UN Human Security Unit, the United Nations Country Team in Uzbekistan and the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office

27 November 2018

10:00 – 12:00

Conference Room 4

UN Headquarters, New York

Background on the Aral Sea disaster

Once the world's fourth largest lake, the drying of the Aral Sea is considered one of the world's worst environmental disasters, causing a cascade of environmental, socioeconomic, health and humanitarian challenges for the governments and communities in the region. The fivefold reduction in water flow from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers has decreased the volume of the Aral Sea by more than 14 times over the past 50 years. Salinity levels have increased by 25 times, and now significantly exceed those of the world's oceans. Today, in place of once flourishing fishing waters, a sandy salt desert of more than 5.5 million hectares is a breeding ground for dust and salt storms, carrying more than 75 million tons of dust and poisonous minerals into the atmosphere every year across thousands of kilometers.

The salinization of the soil and water has degraded arable land. Households once dependent on the Sea for their livelihoods can no longer farm, fish or travel by boat to engage in commerce. As a result, poverty rates in communities surrounding the Aral Sea are significantly higher than the average of their respective countries. Now a desert, the sea bed is a frequent source of dust storms with air contaminants having a negative impact on the health of the region's population as confirmed by the high incidence of anemia, asthma, and tuberculosis.

The Aral catastrophe has exacerbated climatic conditions in the region, increasing dryness and heat in summer and extending periods of cold in the winter. According to forecasts of experts, by 2035-2050 the air temperature in the region can increase by another 1.5-3.0 Celsius relative to current indicators. Moreover, the threatening impact of the Aral catastrophe is observed all over the world. According to international experts, poisonous salts from the Aral region are found on the coasts of Antarctica, in the glaciers of Greenland, in the forests of Norway and many other parts of the globe.

Mitigating the impacts and building resilience of communities

To reduce the destructive impact of the Aral Sea crisis, the governments in the region, the UN system, bilateral and multilateral donors, and others have been raising awareness of the issue and responding to mitigate the human, ecological, and economic consequences in the region. Despite these concerted efforts, more cooperation and increased resources are necessary to address the scope and severity of challenges, reduce vulnerability and build resilience of local communities, and continue to advance sustainable development in the region.

Among these efforts, in 2012, the UN Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) supported the first comprehensive and integrated UN joint programme to improve livelihoods, strengthen community development and mitigate health and environmental risks. The programme was instrumental in underscoring the importance of a multidimensional approach to address interconnected challenges and build the resilience of communities in the region. Moreover, it illustrated the value of ‘Delivering as One’ by guiding the formation of partnerships with a shared vision and direction for coordinated planning, implementation and monitoring.

At the same time, at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York in September 2015, the Uzbekistan delegation recommended the establishment of a special Trust Fund under the auspices of the UN for the Aral Sea region. Furthermore, in his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in New York, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, His Excellency Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev drew the world’s attention to the Aral Sea crisis and the need for greater international and regional support.

Building upon the successes and lessons learned from the first integrated human security programme, the UNTFHS has provided seed funding for a second programme to ensure sustained focus on improving the human security of communities impacted by the Aral Sea disaster and to establish the Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region (MPHSTF). Under the aegis of the UN, the MPHSTF will serve as a single platform for uniting international donor community’s efforts and resources within an integrated human security response framework for the Aral Sea region. Based on the characteristics of the region, the MPHSTF Strategy will focus on ensuring environmental, economic, food, social and health security for affected communities, with the aim to reduce poverty, enhance resilience, and achieve sustainable development across the SDGs.

Objective of the High-Level Event

On 22 June 2018, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 72/283 on strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region. The resolution affirmed the importance of closer and more coordinated cooperation between the States of Central Asia and called upon Member States *inter alia* “to support the efforts of the Central Asian States aimed at mitigating the environmental and socioeconomic consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea.” It further urged the specialized agencies, funds and programmes of the UN system “to harmonize their programmes and activities in support of the priorities for regional cooperation, integration and sustainable development in Central Asia.”

In this context, the Governments of Japan, Nigeria, Norway and Uzbekistan have joined together with the UN Human Security Unit, the United Nations Country Team in Uzbekistan, and the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office to organize a High-Level Event on the MPHSTF for the Aral Sea region. The purpose of the HLE is to gather a broad range of stakeholders to present evidence-based strategies for reducing vulnerability and advancing sustainable development in situations of extreme environmental fragility. Through the MPHSTF, the event aims to unite stakeholders and combine resources to bring to scale a sustainable response to the multiple insecurities faced by the communities of the region. As the “hub” for integrated measures taken at national and regional levels, the MPHSTF will ensure sustainable development, create decent living conditions, and maintain social stability in the Aral Sea region. It is expected that following the event, agreements will be reached with international financial institutions and donor countries on their commitments to support the MPHSTF for the Aral Sea region.