

## HIGH LEVEL PANEL on HYDRO-DIPLOMACY

On the Side of the UN-Water Summit on Groundwater 2022, coordinated by UNESCO

*Under the High Patronage of*

***Mrs. Irina Bokova***

*Co-chair of the International Science Council's Global  
Commission on Science Missions for Sustainability*

*Former Director General, UNESCO*

***Mr. Erik Orsenna***

*Chairman, Initiative for the Future of Great Rivers  
(IAGF Initiative pour l'Avenir des Grands Fleuves)*

*Academician at Académie Française*

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*The Conveners*

**Ambassador S. Gompertz**

Board Member, The Bridge Tank  
former Ambassador for the  
COP21 French Presidency

**Minister (Dr.) Hakima el Haite**

Board Member, The Bridge Tank  
former UNFCCC Champion for  
climate & Minister for COP22

**Dr. Joël Ruet**

Chairman, The Bridge Tank  
Institute for Innovation,  
Ecole Polytechnique

**Minister Hamed Semega**

Board Member, The Bridge Tank  
former High Commissioner,  
Senegal River Basin Organisation

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*"Rethinking Hydro-diplomacy: International Rivers as Instruments for Peace*

*Shared experiences, solutions, and sustainable resources management"*

followed by the launch of the

## WORLD WATER for PEACE CONFERENCE

December 6th, 2022, Paris & hybrid

## VERBATIM RECORDS OF THE CONFERENCE

### WORDS OF INTRODUCTION – CHALLENGES

10h-10h30

*Objectives:* This opening session set the stage for the day by providing an assessment of the existing international & United Nations system on questions of water. It introduced existing hydro-diplomacy initiatives and experiences from non-conflictual and integrated development water co-management efforts for a renewed and enlarged practice of hydro-diplomacy.

Welcome address & Moderator: **RUET Joël** (Dr. Mr.) Chairman, The Bridge Tank, Institute for Innovation, Ecole Polytechnique

- **BOKOVA Irina** (Ms.), Co-chair of the Global Commission on Science Missions for Sustainability, International Science Council (ISC), Former Director General, UNESCO
- **ORSENNA Erik** (Mr.), Chairman, Initiative for the Future of Great Rivers (IAGF Initiative pour l’Avenir des Grands Fleuves), Academician at Académie Française
- **SEMEGA Hamed** (Minister Mr.) Board Member, The Bridge Tank, Former High Commissioner, Senegal River Basin Organisation (OMVS)

#### **Welcome Address by the Moderator, RUET Joël:**

- In his opening address, Joël Ruet thanked the participants for their presence on the high-level panel on hydro-diplomacy, a panel organized as a thorough, open, and hopefully vivid discussion, gathering specialists, practitioners, influencers, and more generally people from different parts of the world who have an ambition to see the world in a positive way and profess to work so that we increasingly see the world in a positive way. International rivers are often seen as areas of conflict; we speak of water wars, Mr Ruet noted, but this event takes the liberty of talking about water peace and rivers for peace. The aim is to try to take the idea seriously that international rivers can serve as tools for the prevention of conflicts and possibly even tools for peace. Across those rivers, there are technologies, institutions, democratic discussions around the management of rivers, from the delta, to the mid-river, to the headsprings - each of these parts can be taken as topic to develop tools.
- Mr Ruet concluded his opening address by thanking Irina Bokova and Erik Orsenna for heartfully agreeing when they were asked whether this meeting could be under their high patronage. They said yes without asking questions, Mr Ruet saluted, before thanking them once more and before thanking the conveners Stéphane Gompertz, Hakima El Haite – who could not join the meeting in person due to a very important meeting in Marrakech but who would join later – and Mr Ruet’s dear friend and elder brother Hamed Semega – whose brain child it was to discuss hydro-diplomacy at this event.

**Introductory question to Ms Irina Bokova by the Moderator, Joël Ruet:**

- Having been at important positions within the UN and still being at such important positions on the side of science now, what is missing in the United Nations system and where does the United Nations stand somewhere midway across the river? What should we do, what can we do to accompany the United Nations system on these issues of international rivers and international waters?

**BOKOVA Irina** (Ms.), Co-chair of the Global Commission on Science Missions for Sustainability, International Science Council (ISC), Former Director General, UNESCO

- Ms Irina Bokova started by thanking Mr Ruet and by expressing her happiness about her presence on the panel, with everyone around the table and on Zoom. This debate resonates very deeply with her experience at UNESCO, Ms Bokova stressed, before reminding the panel that UNESCO has the only intergovernmental hydrological programme, which was launched a couple of years ago already, the Water Security Project, with different institutes that UNESCO hosts in the area of water security and everything within the purview of water diplomacy. Ms Bokova also mentioned the World Water Assessment Programme, which coordinates more than 20 UN funds programmes and agencies and which launches the World Water Assessment Reports. This is a substantial contribution to all the efforts discussed today, Ms Bokova noted. She reminded the assembly of the 2010 Human Rights Council decision to make access to fresh water a human right, an important example of a new generation of human rights. In Ms Bokova's opinion, this is fundamental when we speak about water diplomacy and why we should really look at this issue from a bigger point of view. Because water is not only about access and not only a scientific problem, UNESCO and the United Nations through UN Water, which is a convener of all the funds, programmes, and agencies, are working on this collaborative approach and efforts of the United Nations – we should look at water from the optic of a human right and a societal question, Ms Bokova stated. Water security is connected to food security and energy security, something seen more and more nowadays, and is included within the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 with Goal 6 of SDGs and the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development” 2018-2028. The idea of the Secretary General to convene this very important summit next March is fundamental, Ms Bokova stressed.
- Ms Bokova used her address to present important figures to mention against the background of the geopolitics of water and water security: according to UN Water, 2.3 billion people live in water stress countries – representing one third of humanity. In addition to that, 1.4 billion people, including 450 million children, live in areas of high or extremely high water vulnerability, according to UNICEF. This is where the importance of the panel's discussion is, Ms Bokova stated.

- While water is often discussed as a reason for conflict, it is important that we discuss how to approach and how to make water cooperation a necessity and the priority of governments over conflict. Using the example of the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education and its water diplomacy courses, Ms Bokova also pointed to the importance of building the right institutions to make water cooperation a high priority for countries and to the importance of river basins. The groundwater resources offer 40 percent of access to sanitation and drinking water with more than 200 rivers shared internationally. While there are both good and not so good examples of water cooperation, water diplomacy has become fundamental nowadays against the background of climate change, changing geopolitics, food security and energy security. Ms Bokova finished by stating that Agenda 2030 and the SDGs are universal and interdependent, adding that “we cannot achieve one goal without looking at the others.” This is where Goal 6 goes very closely with all the other SDGs.

**Follow-up question by the Moderator:**

- We all know – and it is absolutely legitimate – that the UN functions on diplomacy, on legal texts and the international law, Mr Ruet noted. We also know that as those rivers have to be managed, the technicalities and the multi-stakeholder aspects have to be handled as well. Similarly, we have for instance the international association for river basin organisations that exists. Mr Ruet thus asked Ms Bokova if she saw a need for a connect between these two communities and maybe also to include a third community of scientists, young entrepreneurs, incubators, and science-based incubation of solutions. Is this the need of the hour or is there something more pressing to think of? Mr Ruet therefore asked Ms Bokova to give recommendations or strict standards which would be the necessary conditions from a practitioner’s point of view for this idea of an open society, forum, or international conference to be really useful and adding something to the exercise.

**Response by Irina Bokova:**

- Ms. Bokova stressed the role of science and practical solutions, noting that there is not necessarily a contradiction between the two groups. Ms Bokova shared that she was recently elected patron of the International Science Council, which came out of the merger of the Natural Sciences and the International Council of the Social Sciences, and that with her friend from the UN, Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand, they are co-chairing their commission on science-based sustainability solutions. This is where Mr Ruet’s question comes in, Ms Bokova noted, as this example illustrates natural and social sciences deciding to merge their efforts, conscious that many of the solutions, though technical, have a societal impact. This is where partnerships and multi-stakeholder approaches come into the picture, Ms Bokova added. Water is one of those examples, as it is impossible to say that water needs only technical solutions but it also has a huge impact on

climate, food security, gender equality, social inclusion, on all the social issues that are there, and on the economy. There is an undeniable need to mobilize all different sectors, scientists first, innovation, and technologies. There is also a need to create platforms, like this conference for example, and build institutions in order to establish concrete solutions. At the end of this day, there might be some good examples on how to approach the challenges that exist in order to propose working methods, good examples, and good practices and then to move out with something very concrete.

**Comment and introduction of the next speaker, Mr Hamed Semega, by the Moderator:**

- What Ms Bokova said about the concrete examples is very important, Mr Ruet noted. The idea today is to check this exercise of sharing good practices and success stories from different parts of the world, with organisations from Africa, Central Asia, and Nordic Countries being present. Mr Ruet expressed his hope that at the end of the day, there would be some clues and ideas on how to interconnect that and work further, beyond the sharing of experience.
- To follow up on what Ms Bokova said, mentioning success stories, the Senegal River is lucky to have an existing organisation, which Mr Semega chaired for a few years, Mr Ruet commented. “What is, in your experience, specific in terms of international river management when you are lucky to have an organisation supported by four states? Give us a few examples of what works, why it works, how it could be a model and what are the limits of this model,” Mr Ruet asked.

**SEMEGA Hamed** (Minister Mr.) Board Member, The Bridge Tank, Former High Commissioner, Senegal River Basin Organisation (OMVS)

- After saluting the participants in attendance and expressing how privileged he felt to be speaking after Irina Bokova and to be sitting next to Erik Orsenna, Hamed Semega started his address by stating that this discussion about rethinking hydro-diplomacy comes at a time when this question is more critical than ever. Hydro-diplomacy is a crossroads between climate action and how managing international rivers today can contribute to global peace in the world. “All this is a living example of how political will combined with necessity can really transform what is a conflictual issue into building stability and peace,” Mr Semega stated. He went on to cite the UNESCO preamble, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” Hydro-diplomacy should be referred to as hope. It is important to know that there is potential for conflict in order to solve this conflict. It was therefore the anticipation of conflict following several years of droughts in the 1970s, which killed both human beings and animals and started big waves of migration to Europe, which motivated the founding of the Senegal River Development Organisation (OMVS).

- Mr Semega reminded the assembly of the context of the Senegal River Development Organisation, as 100% of Nouakchott's drinking water, and 60 to 65% in Dakar come from the Senegal River. The importance of the Fouta Djallon in Guinea – the water tower of West Africa – was also addressed, with major West African Rivers having their spring heads there. The Senegal River thus flows from Guinea, through Mali, to Mauritania and Senegal. "Imagine how the situation would be today in water scarcity if that organisation had not been established in order to really set up a framework of full cooperation. There would be an endless war between at least Mauritania and Senegal," Mr Semega stated.
- The OMVS model is based on complete cooperation and joint investment programmes, something Mr Semega described with the saying "what the left hand does, the right hand should know about." This all has led to what is known today as the OMVS success story. Mr Semega however does not believe that the organisation's model can be easily replicated, but it can at least be used as a source of inspiration and has done so in Africa and internationally. The OMVS hosts the African Network of Basin Organisations, which encompasses more than 20 organisations today. Not matter how large the cooperation on a watercourse is, the potential of conflict diminishes. These basin organisations are therefore in places where the potential for conflicts exists.
- Bouncing back on Ms Bokova comments about the Water Assessment Programme, Mr Semega continued by taking a more global perspective with the example of the Transboundary Waters Assessment Programme published by the Global Environment Facility in 2016. There are 286 transboundary river basins shared by 156 countries and there are rising hydro-political tensions due to governance problems. The main issue comes from the relationship between upstream and downstream. As more and more dams are built upstream, the effects are felt downstream. In the absence of cooperation, potential for conflict is huge. From an African perspective, were the Lake Tchad to disappear considering its considerable shrinkage, the potential for conflict would be huge.
- In his final point on headsprings, saluting the commitment from Erik Orsenna, The Bridge Tank, and Joel Ruet in favour of the Fouta Djallon, Mr Semega underlined the slow disappearance of the headsprings in the water castle of West Africa from the 1980s to today and its impact on major rivers in West Africa, as their survival depends on them. In 2030, 150 million Sahelian people could live in complete hydric stress. This conference thus serves an important purpose: to give hydro-diplomacy its true meaning back, namely the prevention of conflicts, and to start an international dialogue on the topic.

**Follow-up question by the Moderator, Joël Ruet:**

- "You gave us the hope, hope through the example of a success story, of something that works, making it known that cooperation is possible," Mr Ruet noted. "Now that you gave us the hope, give

us the secrets.” Mr Ruet further mentioned the example of a delegation from Central Asia that came and studied the OMVS model through the Swiss Cooperation. While not all the solutions exist, the headsprings of the Senegal River being for example endangered, still, there are solutions. Using the example of three tools, i.e. the common property of infrastructure across member states, the legal status of the Senegal River, and the assemblies of people and beneficiaries of the river, which the OMVS coordinates, how important are these tools?

**Response by Hamed Semega:**

- The basic foundation for water cooperation is knowledge. The key element to success is political will for the countries to come together, which itself requires knowledge that there is an issue and knowledge to build on. Mr Semega thus stressed the importance of common knowledge of the river and of shared information, which is why science is key. More and more organisations and countries come to study the example of the OMVS, from Central Asia through the Swiss cooperation, but also more and more African countries and river basin organisations coming to Senegal. The most recent delegation came from Mano River Organisation and spent 10 days in Senegal, studying the OMVS model. The key is also to get all stakeholders on board. Wherever there are small initiatives of cooperation on transboundary rivers, Mr Semega noted, there is hope to build ties for the future of rivers.

**Transition and introduction of the next speaker, Mr Erik Orsenna, by the Moderator :**

- Ms Bokova and Mr Semega gave two possible fields of action, one is the UN system, the second field of action is the Fouta Djallon. “What are the practical actions and types of actions you would suggest and what are the necessary conditions and strong commitments needed for these actions to be meaningful, efficient, and useful?” Mr Ruet asked Mr Orsenna.

**ORSENNA Erik** (Mr.), Chairman, Initiative for the Future of Great Rivers (IAGF Initiative pour l’Avenir des Grands Fleuves), Academician at Académie Française

- After thanking Irina Bokova and Hamed Semega for their contributions, Erik Orsenna reminded the participants that as a member of the French Academy, he had to talk in French. Mr Orsenna started by stating that water should not be approached as a menace like climate change is, but that water needed concrete stories, characters, and dates to work as examples proving that there are existing solutions. With these concrete examples, we can start asking ourselves: “why not?” If hydro-diplomacy has been successful in West Africa, then why not somewhere else, why not everywhere around the world? The “why not?” is key, Erik Orsenna stressed, “the difference between a fantasy

and a reality is a date.” That date is March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 with the Water Conference of the United Nations in New York. If this conference turned out to be a meeting for peace, this would be good news for the world.

- Erik Orsenna shared that it was his deepest conviction that “if we do not change the mechanisms of war into tools of peace, we are doomed.” Despite current difficulties in Europe, Mr Orsenna reminded the participants that 5 years after the end of WWII, European countries decided to create the European Coal and Steel Community, turning coal and steel – the mechanisms of war – into tools of peace. Let us do the same thing with water, by turning it into a tool for peace despite it being closely connected to future threats, Mr Orsenna stressed.
- The initial idea behind the Initiative for the Future of Great Rivers (IAGF) – the organisation chaired by Mr Orsenna – and the importance of the word “Initiative” was not to stick to the diagnosis of issues but to use this diagnosis to move towards treatment. In this time of crisis for African Rivers, Mr Orsenna hopes to bring these solutions and successful examples to the UN Water Conference in New York. Going beyond this question, what is at stake is undoubtedly peace, but a driver for peace is found in rebuilding confidence in knowledge. Turning to Ms Bokova, Erik Orsenna stressed the importance of UNESCO in this process, particularly to rebuild trust between populations and knowledge. Barbarity will spread without knowledge and trust in it, generated and activated by dissocial networks, which are the opposite of social networks, which are destructors of societies. Mr Orsenna ended his address by sharing a personal experience from his time on the banks of Lake Chad, where he learnt a simple rule: as water decreases, terrorism increases.

**Question and comment by the Moderator:**

- Mr Ruet responded by saying that the date of the UN Water Conference was taken and that The Bridge Tank would be preparing for it and was honoured to be working with the IAGF. Mr Ruet noted that in Western literary, cultural, and civilizational tradition, there was this idea that identity was one unit, whereas other civilizations have the idea that identities are shared, mixed, and multiple. When countries do have riverine organisations and accept to communicate through one unified voice, that’s already difficult but work is possible. But when countries are in conflict, when there is no such organisation, the river has multiple ambiguous identities, a multiplicity of voices, countries, and characters, how do we act?

**Response by Erik Orsenna:**

- We must listen to what the river is saying, from the spring to the sea, Mr Orsenna stated. There is an obvious unity as conflicts will spread downstream and upstream if we do not take care of river springheads. It is thus important to share the stories and possible futures that might arise if we were

6<sup>th</sup> December 2022, Paris & Hybrid

not to protect those springs, notably in the Fouta Djallon. Erik Orsenna shared another personal story from when he was on the banks of the Senegal River, in the city of Podor, as a war was about to break out between Mauritania and Senegal because of conflicts between farmers and stockbreeders. Peace was achieved neither through the UN, nor through the Organisation for African Unity, but through the unity and unified voice of the river. It is important to have that mythology, those multiple and diverse identities working together, and the ambition that started, for example, UNESCO and the European Community. We have to go wider, larger, be more ambitious, and more concrete, Mr Orsenna stressed, thus confirming the importance of a date: what are we going to do on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022? If the 22<sup>nd</sup> is just like any other day, why should we even go there?

**Comment by the Moderator, Joël Ruet:**

- We can give the date and a plan of action, as we want to go there but on the basis of two things; first – to bring the ideas that have emerged from today’s discussions on hydro-diplomacy to prepare a side-event on hydro-diplomacy, and second – to bring those ideas and concrete stories from the Fouta Djallon to the United Nations, which is why there is a project to go to the Fouta Djallon highlands under Mr Orsenna’s impulsion.

**Response by Erik Orsenna:**

- Mr Orsenna stressed his wish to go to the Fouta Djallon because people listen to people who have legitimacy; and legitimacy means having been there. “If we go to the UN saying that this is all very important, that things are very alarming and going badly, nobody is going to care,” Mr Orsenna noted. “But if we say, I’m just coming back from there, I was there one month ago, this is what the situation is like: huge water reserves have turned into small puddles.” Mr Orsenna mentioned an expression he loves, namely “reporters of hope” and this is what his Initiative hopes to be. 15 years ago in France, when Mr Orsenna wrote his book *L’Avenir de l’eau* (The future of water), people told him that this was all very nice but that we would never suffer from droughts in France, a temperate country. Mr Orsenna is now going around France to find solutions against droughts. The Bridge Tank has to be The Bridge Tank of solutions.

**Conclusion by the Moderator, Joël Ruet:**

- “As Mao said: No investigation, no right to speak,” Mr Ruet quoted, before committing to conducting an investigation and to bring a report to New York. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, at the Collège de France, there will be “Les Journées de la Science Populaire,” which will be another opportunity to present those results to the public.

**END OF THE INTRODUCTORY SESSION.**