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Statement

by

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United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary

of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

**the opening of the fourth session of
the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health**

Geneva

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[10 minutes]

Honourable Federal Councillor, Mr Berset,

Dr. Östlin,

Excellencies,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely glad to be here with you today, as the themes of this meeting - water, sanitation and health - are central to our everyday life. In the past years, we have witnessed how these topics have mobilized citizens throughout the pan-European region. Citizens are ready to take to the streets for their rights to water and sanitation. They are concerned about the quality of the water they drink, the status of our water resources and the sustainability of their use.

This year's reporting shows that we have advanced in all these areas. Access to water and sanitation has increased throughout the region, including in rural areas. Outbreaks and incidences of water-related diseases have diminished. The quality of water bodies has improved, often with impressive declines in both bacterial and chemical contaminants.

The Protocol is certainly not the only driver of these advancements. But it is without doubt a unique factor of progress in our region, because it addresses key underlying problems: weak governance, intersectoral cooperation and capacity.

There has been great advancement in target setting and review of progress. All countries have worked towards their targets. Many have reached them. As a result, we have better access to water and sanitation, better drinking water, better treatment of waste waters. Water resources are better protected and their quality is enhanced. And the health of citizens is improved.

Setting targets strengthens intersectoral cooperation by promoting sharing of information, and a common understanding of the issues and priorities. Well-formulated targets trigger policy attention and action. The benefits in terms of

joint leadership, coherence of policies, efficiency of action and commitment to the issues are considerable.

At the same time, target setting requires resources and commitment. In this area, with the *Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Setting Targets and Reporting under the Protocol on Water and Health*, you have added another formidable instrument to your toolkit.

The Protocol has also done ground-breaking work in the human rights to water and sanitation. It has helped numerous governments apply an “equity lens” to ensure that these rights are guaranteed to all, including people living in poverty, rural residents, and vulnerable or marginalized groups. The recent focus, moving from assessment to action, is a concrete testimony of your commitment to leave no one behind. The *Guidance note on the development of action plans*, launched at this meeting, will cement the Protocol as the instrument to translate these human rights into practice in our region.

There are other achievements as well, and my colleague, Ms. Piroska Östlin from the WHO Regional Office for Europe, will illustrate these. I hope you will agree that the joint UNECE – WHO Europe secretariat is a success story. The two organizations’ expertise is complementary. WHO Europe’s efforts on surveillance of water related disease, small scale supplies for drinking water and sanitation, access to water, sanitation and hygiene in schools etc. greatly enrich UNECE’s efforts on target setting and reporting. I am proud of this excellent cooperation and thank our colleagues from the WHO – Regional Office for Europe.

Despite great progress, we still have more to do. People are still dying due to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene. This is simply unacceptable in the 21st century. The ongoing financial crisis, growing inequality and poverty undermine our achievements. Countries struggle to strengthen or even maintain the systems in place – to say nothing of the unmet need for new investments. Climate change threatens all aspects of water and sanitation. Population dynamics, migration and urbanization add further pressure.

We have huge challenges ahead of us. But we also have great tools in our hands.

The dedicated SDG 6 on water and sanitation, and the many related targets under the other SDGs, constitute the strongest ever global political commitment to this area. Now it is time for all stakeholders to act. The Protocol can help. Its approach, its scope and the work under it are fully aligned with the SDGs. By supporting the setting of targets and monitoring progress, the Protocol can be *the* tool for the UNECE region to translate SDG 6 and other targets into national contexts, tailored to national capacities and priorities.

The new programme of work for 2017-2019, which you will adopt during this meeting, also aligns very well with the SDGs. I wish to thank the many Parties and organizations that have led activities or provided financial contributions, thereby contributing to the concrete outcomes. My thanks also to the new countries which have expressed willingness to lead and support future activities.

Your commitment and support are key for the work under the Protocol. None of the past achievements in implementation, assistance delivered, and exchange of experience would have been possible without them. And successful implementation of the future programme of work will only be possible with sufficient financial and in-kind support. I therefore call upon all Parties and other stakeholders to contribute to the Protocol trust funds.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Switzerland not only for hosting this meeting, but also for its political leadership and active engagement in the Protocol. In particular, I'd like to acknowledge the key role played by Mr. Pierre Studer, of the Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office, as Chair of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol since 2013, and as a long-time supporter of the Protocol's activities.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.