

**Opening statement during the high-level segment of the
Fourth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health
Monday, 14 November 2016
Geneva, Switzerland**

Honourable Federal Councillor, Mr Berset,
Executive Secretary, Mr Bach,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, it is a great pleasure to address the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health, which draws together such a broad level of representation and expertise from throughout the European Region.

Let me join Mr Bach in expressing our gratitude to the Swiss Confederation for hosting this Meeting. We are equally grateful for Switzerland's continuous leadership and support to the Protocol over the past years. It is very clear: Without the Swiss stewardship and the guidance of Mr Pierre Studer

in his capacity as the Protocol Chair over the past three years, the Protocol would surely not stand where it stands today.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Having easy access to clean water and living in environments free of human waste should be a given for a decent life in the 21st century. Universal access to safe and sustainable sanitation and drinking-water is fundamental in promoting health, well-being, dignity and development, and is one of the foundations for creating healthy and resilient communities.

Despite the considerable progress made in the past decades, waterborne diseases still represent a significant health burden in the European region. They impact quality of life, cause misery, hinder productivity, strain health systems and submerge people in poverty. I find it unacceptable that 14 Europeans die every day from diarrhoea caused by poor water, sanitation and hygiene. Children under-five are particularly vulnerable to diarrhoea as a leading cause of

malnutrition and death. The good news is, however, that all waterborne diseases and associated deaths are preventable.

Goals 3 and 6 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development convey a clear call to bring together our shared vision towards combating waterborne diseases and set a high bar of universal and equitable access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene for all people.

The Protocol on Water and Health plays a vital role in attaining this vision in the European Region. The Protocol's priorities clearly match the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda.

Let me highlight three examples:

Firstly, we need to finish our *unfinished* business on providing basic sanitation for all.

The European Region has not met the MDG sanitation target. The unpleasant reality is that 62 million Europeans do not enjoy access to basic sanitation and 1.7 million people still practice open defecation.

Investing in sanitation not only prevents disease but also makes sense from an economic perspective: every dollar spent on sanitation brings a return of five dollars by keeping people healthy and productive.

We need to accelerate our attention towards tackling the sanitation gap. WHO stands ready to support this needed shift in focus, together with our partners in UNECE.

Secondly, we need to focus on improving the *quality of existing water and sanitation services.*

Having a water tap on the premises is great, but does not guarantee that it is safe, sufficient and reliable. The mere presence of a toilet does not guarantee environmentally sound disposal and reuse of human waste.

SDG 6 clearly calls for more attention to providing *safe water and sanitation services.* In doing so, we can achieve major health improvements.

Our policy response is to adopt water and sanitation safety plans, which are globally accepted as the public health

benchmark. The Protocol has been the European hub for promoting and supporting adoption of such safety plans in policy and practice, and will remain so in the future.

Approximately 23% of the population of the European Region get their water from small-scale systems. These people served by such systems in rural areas and small towns *deserve* the right to the same level of health protection as others, and thus they remain a focus. Evidence, guidance and tools developed under the Protocol have become widely recognized. I trust that the new publications we are launching at this Meeting will further help countries in improving and sustaining their rural services.

Thirdly, safe and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services are vital for all children.

Inadequate WASH in schools can compromise pupils' education, health and well-being. This is why failure is not an option. I find it hard to accept that in 21st century Europe there are still schools without safe, running water, soap and functional and clean toilets that fit pupil's needs.

The Protocol emphasized WASH in schools as a priority area for action. We convened health, water and education sectors, involved youth organizations and worked with our UN-family to support Member States in painting a brighter European picture of WASH in schools.

This is the first important step for joint advocacy and action, the results of which will unfold over the course of this meeting.

But our focus doesn't stop with schools. We are pushing for progress in other settings beyond households, such as health care facilities and workplaces. Suitable policy and infrastructural interventions in these settings can bring significant health gains.

To respond to the SDG's call for universal access, it is an important step for the Protocol to have a serious look at WASH in health care facilities. Improving this situation is at the heart of the WHO, and is in urgent need of attention in some parts of the Region. This calls for strategic investment for health, covering maternal and child health, prevention of infections and health systems strengthening, including a shift towards environmental sustainability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the European Region, the Protocol is the “policy home” for advancing health and well-being, through better water, sanitation and hygiene management.

The forthcoming programme of work is in response to the global call of the SDGs. It will address global pressures, such as climate change, with a view to strengthening resilience of water and sanitation services, safe waste water reuse, and sustainable water resource management.

To create cohesive and coherent policy responses to these complex global issues, we aim to foster integrated governance with all our partners, and society as a whole.

The European health policy framework, *Health 2020*, recognizes the need to make governance for health and well-being a priority for more than just the health sector alone. The health sector can launch public health campaigns, treat the sick and establish effective surveillance systems. To tackle the true root causes of water-related diseases, water, environment, agriculture, rural development, education and financing all need to join forces.

The Protocol can play a vital role in further advancing such approaches in integrated governance. Through its architecture, even through these Meetings of the Parties, it provides important platforms for enabling cross-sectoral partnerships, and bringing together diverse players.

Implementation and progress is, and will continue to be driven forward by setting targets and reporting on those targets. Furthermore, these targets will support countries in translating the SDGs into achievable goals of national relevance. To this end, I would like to take this opportunity to thank both our UNECE colleagues, and the Swiss leadership on the Task Force on Target Setting and Reporting for their valuable role in driving forward implementation.

The European Environment and Health Process created the Protocol, and already the preparations for the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health are in full swing.

The 2010 Parma Declaration on Environment and Health and the Protocol mutually and coherently supported each

other's implementation, and it is expected that the 2017 Ostrava Declaration will likewise include explicit reference the Protocol as the prime instrument for advancing the pan-European water, sanitation and health agenda, with a renewed call for ratification.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me reassure you that the WHO Regional Office for Europe remains *fully* committed to continue its support to the Protocol.

Thanks to your dedication to the Protocol, we have seen major achievements and success stories throughout the years of its existence. The incoming programme of work is topical, ambitious and forward-looking with a view on responding to the Parties' needs.

With UNECE we have an excellent partner on our side. I would like to thank Mr Bach and his team for the good cooperation in the spirit of our mutual passion for progress.

In implementing the ambitious programme of work, our aspirations need to meet reality. To effectively respond to the SDGs, to maintain the Protocol as an effective tool for target setting and partnerships, *and* to ensure the continuity of high-quality secretariat services, it is essential that Parties are called upon to make financial resources available that are both sufficient and stable.

We *will* continue to make the Protocol a joint success. I believe it is worth the effort. After all, we are talking about nothing less than improving health and well-being of our fellow human beings.

I wish you a most fruitful meeting.

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1450 words

Allotted time: 10 minutes