

OPENING STATEMENT BY  
MR. MAREK BELKA, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR  
EUROPE,  
AT THE THIRD UNECE REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION MEETING  
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

GENEVA, 28-29 January 2008

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Third UNECE Regional Implementation Meeting on Sustainable Development. The results of this meeting will, as in the case of the two previous Regional Implementation Meetings, feed into the Global Commission for Sustainable Development meeting to be held later this year in May in New York. In this connection, let me highlight and stress the added value of regional inputs to global processes, including that related to Sustainable Development. Furthermore, the role of Regional Commissions is key in providing the regional perspective –it can bring together the different actors active in the region, as well as making, as appropriate, its own substantive contribution.

The previous RIMS have raised awareness of countries and stakeholders of our region's particular concerns and contributions to

the global work. In addition, we have been able to highlight the need to give increasing importance to the implementation of commitments on the ground, including on the local level. The CSD process has also benefited from relevant regional work, including, for example, in the ECE context, the work on public participation under the Aarhus Convention and on education for sustainable development. I am convinced that the added value of the regional contributions can be even further increased in the future.

As was the case for the previous RIMS, this meeting will assess progress in key sectors of sustainable development in our region – for this cycle of the CSD's work programme, the thematic clusters are : agriculture, rural development, land management, desertification and drought, and Africa. In this connection, let me add that obviously not all issues have the same relevance for all regions. The ECE region is, nevertheless expected to provide inputs not only with regard to progress and challenges in its member countries, but also, from a donor perspective, particularly for Africa.

Bearing this in mind, I suggest we address these issues from three different angles:

- How can developed countries in the region play a leadership role in promoting sustainable development in the respective areas?
- What are the challenges in transition countries; how can they be addressed by the countries themselves; which kind of assistance is needed within the region?
- Looking beyond our own region: what is the state of our cooperation with the developing world, in particular with Africa, in these areas, and how can it be further strengthened?

We also have to keep in mind that we need to discuss these issues in an integrated manner, as there are interlinkages among them and with other challenges on the international agenda.

Let me take the example of sustainable agriculture and rural development:

The increasing world population, changing dietary preferences and the increasing demand on biomass for bioenergy production are creating pressure on land and other resources to produce more agricultural raw materials. In many countries of the ECE region, there

are no major land reserves that could be used for farming. Is it possible to improve crop and livestock yields more without a further deterioration of natural resources, like air, water and soils?

In countries where agricultural production has caused serious environmental problems, like erosion and land degradation, pollution of waterways and loss of biodiversity, which political and technical measures are needed to make progress in reducing these problems?

There are important linkages between agriculture and climate change: how will climate change affect agricultural production in the region? What agricultural and rural adaptation strategies are required? How can GHG emissions from agriculture be reduced?

While sustainable agriculture and rural development are issues of relevance for all UNECE member countries, desertification and drought affect large parts of our region, in particular the Northern Mediterranean, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

A number of countries from these sub-regions have been increasingly affected by drought during the last decade, with direct impacts on agriculture as well as economic sectors which depend on water, such as tourism, industry, energy and transport. Water scarcity and drought also have broader impacts on natural resources in general. How can these challenges be addressed? I look forward to learning more about initiatives taken in this regard, like the Drought Management Centres for South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

With regard to desertification and drought, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) provides an international framework of cooperation for all countries. Some of the challenges to be addressed by this meeting with regard to desertification might be: managing the interlinkages between desertification, climate change and biodiversity; moving from crisis to risk environmental management and integrating the socio-economic costs of desertification in the policy framework.

The management of land resources in the UNECE region is characterized by a broad range of different land management

practices and approaches. Despite progress in most countries, significant challenges remain regarding the establishment of modern land administration systems which is still incomplete, the effective control over the implementation of land policy and an adequate institutional set-up and capacities.

All of these challenges and issues are relevant for discussion within the ECE region. But, as I mentioned there is another important subtheme of our meeting: Africa and we therefore will look beyond our own region and discuss cooperation with Africa in all of the areas that I have mentioned. This discussion will be greatly enriched by the inputs from the Director of the Food Security and Sustainable Development Division of our sister organization, the Economic Commission for Africa, Mr. Josué Dione, who has traveled far to be with us. I thank him very much for this.

We will try to assess the support of donor countries from our region for sustainable agriculture and rural development in Africa in the context of climate change and desertification, review obstacles and discuss next steps.

Finally, we have to keep in mind in our discussions the broader, so-called cross-cutting issues that are relevant for achieving progress in implementation in all sectors. Let me mention in particular education for sustainable development, changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production and gender equality.

Preparations for this meeting would not have been possible without the support of many partners in and outside the UN system. I would particularly like to thank the Secretariat of the UNCCD, WMO, FAO, and the Africa Partnership Forum Support Unit in OECD for their contributions to the background documentation.

I would also particularly like to welcome the representatives of the Major Groups. The CSD process has become unthinkable without your commitment and critical contributions to the debate, and we look forward to hearing your ideas and perspectives in this meeting.

Your agenda is full so without further ado let us turn to the adoption of that agenda so that we can proceed.

Thank you for your attention.