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Statement

by

Mr. Christian Friis Bach

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary

of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

Opening of the WHO Regional Committee

12 September 2016

Thank you Mr. President.
Excellencies,
Deputy-Director General,
Regional Director,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We hope the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will change the world. We know they must change the way we work in the UN, in governments, all over the world. The SDGs are closely linked. As Ms. Jakab said, environmental factors contribute up to 20 percent of the preventable disease burden in this Region. Air pollution alone is responsible for a quarter of a million premature deaths in our region. Thousands are killed and injured on our roads every year. Climate change will demand its victims.

The problems are linked. The solutions must be linked. Achieving one goal depends on achieving all goals. This demands that we work together – across borders, across sectors, across organizations. In the UN in Europe we have come far in developing a strong UN partnership, for which I thank all UN agencies, and we have an excellent partnership between WHO and UNECE.

The European Environment and Health Process (EHP) is a much needed and very innovative cooperation that we are ready to further support with our five large environmental conventions, the Environment for Europe process, our environmental monitoring and our Environmental Performance Reviews.

We work closely and successfully with WHO on improving air quality through the Joint Task Force under the unique UNECE Air Convention. The task force, co-chaired by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health, has been instrumental in demonstrating the linkages between air pollution and health effects, which are now accepted globally. There is a lot more to be done to clean the air. Let us strengthen our efforts together.

I would like to thank Ms. Jakab and the WHO regional office for Europe also for excellent cooperation in our support for the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP) to create green and healthy mobility. It is a perfect match: WHO's strong health knowledge; and our transport conventions and vehicle standards and our environmental conventions. We have a historic opportunity to transform our transport systems with electric and self-driving vehicles, sustainable public transport systems and not least with

walking and cycling. Coming from Denmark, where I grew up on a bike, I welcome the idea of a bicycling convention. We can save lives not only with reduced emissions but also with improved road safety, on which UNECE and WHO also work closely together. We hope countries will support a new set of Road Safety indicators and a Road Safety Fund.

We do highly successful joint work under the UNECE-WHO/Europe Protocol on Water and Health and have seen significant progress on access to water and sanitation, improving the quality of drinking water and reducing water-related disease. There will be new challenges due to climate change and new urgency of the Protocol with SDG 3 on health and 6 on clean water and sanitation. The upcoming Meeting of the Parties is expected to adopt an ambitious programme of work. We hope for support from member States.

Finally, our Batumi Initiative for a Green Economy – BIG-E – agreed at the Environment for Europe Ministerial this summer, was developed with key players including WHO. It covers multiple sectors – from smart transport, air pollution and sustainable consumption – that will have direct and positive health effects. We invite you all – and the World Health Organisation – to join in implementing the framework and in greening our economies.

So let me warmly and strongly thank Mrs. Jakab and the WHO Regional Office for our strong and productive partnership. To achieve Agenda 2030 we must break down silos, work in synergy, across sectors, across organizations. We are already showing in Europe that this can be done.

Thank you.
