Honourable Executive Secretary Alkalaj, Ladies and Gentleman,

Two months ago world leaders gathered in Rio to renew and strengthen the global commitment to sustainable development.

The Rio summit reaffirmed that water is at the core of sustainable development. Water is part and parcel of a number of key global challenges and it is of critical importance in the successful implementation of the three dimensions of sustainable development. One of the most significant outcomes of Rio +20 was the decision to define sustainable development goals. Looking at the future water scenarios, there is no doubt that water should be among these goals.

In two decades we will have globally 40% less freshwater resources available than is needed, if we continue with business as usual. To achieve water and food security for a growing world population, in the context of climate change, new solutions are needed. These problems cannot be solved without transboundary cooperation at all levels.

We can see from the Rio outcome document "The Future We Want" that addressing transboundary waters at the global level is complex and challenging. It is with a sense of disappointment and dismay one reads the outcome in this regard. The Rio outcome does not include any specific reference to transboundary waters. However, it does include the commitment to improve the implementation of integrated water resources management at all levels as appropriate, and this should also consider the aspects related to transboundary waters.

For Finland, transboundary water issues are particularly important as we share transboundary watercourses with three neighbours — Sweden, Norway and Russia. Finland has actively advanced transboundary water cooperation for the last 50 years. In 1966 the International Law Association adopted the Helsinki Rules and in 1970 Finland requested that the development and codification of the rules for international watercourses be included on the agenda of the UN General Assembly.

These efforts led to the adoption in 1997 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses. All countries who share
watercourses with their neighbouring countries should be encouraged to ratify the Convention, as well as the 2003 amendment to the UNECE Convention by which other countries outside the UNECE are allowed to join.

Although we have not yet brought our global instruments on transboundary waters into force, we are very fortunate to have many well-functioning regional agreements.

The implementation of the UNECE Water Convention and its Protocol on Water and Health has been a real success story, and has contributed to the environmental, social and economic well-being of people in many and very concrete ways. By any standard, the UNECE region is the most advanced in its cooperation on transboundary waters.

We should share these good experiences and lessons learned with other international fora so that they too may benefit from efficient cooperation on transboundary watercourses.

Even after 20 years of implementing the Water Convention, we can see that its main principles are still as relevant as ever. One of the successes of the Convention has been the capacity to adapt the activities under it to new and emerging challenges.

The Water Convention's central aim is to strengthen local, national and regional measures within the UNECE region to protect and ensure the quantity, quality and sustainable use of transboundary water resources.

The Convention takes a holistic approach, based on the understanding that water resources play an integral part in ecosystems, as well as in human societies and economies. Its commitment to integrated water resources management replaces an earlier focus on localised sources of pollution and management of separate components of the ecosystem.

The adoption of the Protocol on Water and Health in 1999 complements the Convention and addresses very fundamental needs. In the European part of the UNECE region alone, an estimated 120 million people — that is, one person in seven — do not have access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. Finland is very pleased that the Rio +20 Conference reaffirmed the right to water and sanitation as a basic human right.

Within the framework of the Convention, the Parties have entered into bilateral or multilateral agreements and have established joint bodies such as river and lake
commissions. Implementation though is not always an easy task and sometimes further support is needed. The Parties to the Water Convention have agreed to establish a mechanism through which problems related to implementation and possible differences regarding the interpretation of the Convention can be addressed.

The Water Convention is not the only legal framework that includes enforcement measures and their follow-up, but it does cover a broad range of activities such as protection of transboundary water resources, integrated water resources management, ecosystem protection, flood management and health aspects. The two assessments of transboundary waters of the region have contributed constructively to efforts in improving the state of European waters.

We have made progress, but problems still persist. Efficient implementation that addresses adaptation to climate change in the context of transboundary waters is needed, as is contributions to the global work related to transboundary waters. We also need to strengthen the application of an ecosystem approach.

The ongoing implementation support to countries — in projects, on capacity building and through joint activities — is still very important.

The UNECE has played a crucial role in the strengthening of cooperation and security in Europe. We are very pleased that through National Policy Dialogues cooperation has been established with countries in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Finland’s water-sector cooperation with countries in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia is implemented through FinWaterWEI — a programme aimed at developing comprehensive use and management of water resources. In the future, our cooperation will focus on Central Asia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In spite of our efforts over the past 50 years we still lack a global instrument. The entry into force of both the 1997 UN Convention and the amendment of the UNECE Convention should be of the highest priority and we are now waiting for this to happen in the near future.

These instruments should complement each other and provide different countries with the possibility to choose the best instruments depending on their circumstances. It is, of course, also important to harmonise the implementation of different instruments and make them efficient.
It is a great honour for Finland to organise this event celebrating 20 years of the Helsinki Convention. This Convention not only has a brilliant past, but it will also rise to future challenges. I would like to thank all parties who have participated in the preparations of this event. I know you will have stimulating and thought-provoking discussions on the past, present and future of the Convention!