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on Sustainable Management of Water and Greening the Economy

Keynote address

Minister of the Environment of Finland,
Mr. Ville Niinistö

Mr. Chair, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

In the declaration of this Conference we have agreed to take the lead in the transition to a green economy. Water resources play a central role in this effort.

Sustainable management of water resources is a key contributor to poverty eradication: water means health, hygiene, food, energy, transportation. Water-related green technologies support the achievement of the MDGs, particularly concerning access to safe drinking water and access to sanitation. Technologies for more efficient use of irrigation water contribute to food security.

The Rio+20 Conference provides an excellent context for enhancing the dissemination of best practices on environmentally sound technologies and know-how. Finland regards sustainable use and management of natural resources as a foundation for economic prosperity, based on investments in renewable resources, ecosystem services, clean technology and education and training. It is only this way we can ensure that economic assets are available also for future generations. Therefore, we need to secure the financing of water services and infrastructure, through setting realistic tariffs and using relevant economic instruments.

Adaptation to climate change is a big challenge to the water sector: already now we have experienced more frequent droughts and floods. We need to manage our limited water resources in ways that can be adapted to complex circumstances with different and often conflicting water demands and interests.

A key element for success is a responsible planning process and interaction between interest groups. Processes where broad participation, dissemination

of reliable data and citizen's awareness raising are included already in the beginning tend to increase acceptability of actions and, over a longer term, will result in cost-efficient and sustainable solutions.

Sometimes the challenge of settling conflicting demands lies between neighbouring countries. Water can be a catalyst for peace and security. Strengthening bi- and multinational coordination mechanisms provides a useful tool for preventing conflicts over scarce water resources in shared waters. Most watercourses in the EU are shared by several countries and we have extensive experience in cooperation through international river commissions. The UNECE Convention on the protection and use of transboundary watercourses and international lakes has given us a very useful framework for transboundary cooperation. These experiences could also be used in other regions, to help prevent conflicts over shared waters.

In Finland we are privileged to have rich and clean water resources. However, this picture has not always been so beautiful. How did we manage to reach the point where our specific water consumption in public water supply was reduced by 30% in 30 years and our wastewater treatment is one of the most efficient in the world?

The key drivers in these efforts have been long-term target setting and determined decision-making, efficient and predictable legislation, intensive research and development, strict permits, good governance, capacity building and commitment by all stakeholders. Under our legislation, the water charges cover the long-term investments and costs of water companies. In 2000 the EU adopted the Water Framework Directive. Through implementing River Basin Management plans we are forced to continue to improve the state of our waters even more.

HELCOM (Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission) is a good example of successful cooperation between the 9 coastal countries bordering the Baltic Sea. Additionally, I would like to point out the close cooperation between Finland and St Petersburg. Our cooperation with St Petersburg water works "Vodokanal" goes back 20 years. The results speak for themselves: today up to 95% of all wastewaters are treated and phosphorus discharges have been cut in half. Along with the international cooperation, a strong commitment and self-financing by the city and Vodokanal have made this possible. Another key factor is that industries and citizens pay for the water services.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen,

Many water ecosystems are threatened. It is necessary to preserve and restore ecosystem services and to maintain green infrastructures. New instruments to reach these targets are needed.

Multilateral agreements and international standards constitute the normative foundation and level the playing field for responsible activities by the private sector. The EU is committed to enhancing International Environmental Governance, thereby aiming for a strong environmental pillar within the broader context of strengthening overall sustainable development governance. In this regard, we have already expressed support for upgrading UNEP into a UN-specialized agency for the environment, which would be recognized as the “leader” or “UN voice” on matters relevant to the environment.

Finland has provided its commitments to Astana Water Action. One of our commitments is planned to be implemented under the “Wider Europe Initiative”, Finland’s development cooperation programme for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia. We look with great interest to the commitments given by others and will continue strengthening our efforts. We are also happy to welcome the Astana Green Bridge Initiative and encourage Kazakhstan and other countries and partners to continue in building this bridge between Europe and Asia – a bridge that could offer help in disseminating the best environmental solutions and practices. But not only that, it will also contribute to confidence-building and cooperation of peoples.