



NATIONS UNIES
COMMISSION ÉCONOMIQUE
POUR L'EUROPE

ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫЕ НАЦИИ
ЕВРОПЕЙСКАЯ ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКАЯ
КОМИССИЯ

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR EUROPE

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Opening address by Mr. Ján Kubiš
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Secretary of the United Nations
Economic Commission for Europe**

**at the International Conference on Risk Assessment
and Management
(Geneva, 24 November 2009)**

Distinguished delegates,

Many risks confront the United Nations. The troubling events of recent weeks have made us again aware of our Organization's vulnerability. Yet, fragile as our Organization may itself be, the main purpose of the UN is to enable its member States to better shield their peoples from natural and man-made hazards.

Let us start by asking ourselves: "What are risks and hazards?" In everyday language, we use these terms to refer to any event that has the potential to cause harm or damage, to people, the environment but also property and immaterial assets.

How, then, does the United Nations contribute to prevent such harmful events and to reduce their impact and consequences should they occur?

There is of course, the fundamental work undertaken by the UN Security Council to help maintain peace and restore security, by humanitarian agencies to relieve the sufferings of populations in the face of immediate hardships and by the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

However, there are also many other examples of policy and technical work undertaken by the UN to mitigate material hazards. Let me give you some examples. The UNECE promotes sustainable forest management, which plays a key role in the prevention of landslides and fires. UNECE also hosts environmental conventions that contribute to reducing the number of polluting accidents and their cross-border effects. Technical norms and standards in the area of transport make travelling across our region safer, by providing guidance to governments as

regards road infrastructure, vehicles features, and drivers' behaviour.

In underscoring the success of the organization in discharging these important functions, I would like to acknowledge that it is you, the experts, our delegates, who are the ones that develop and implement tools like the ones I briefly introduced. I would therefore like to use the occasion of this opening address to thank you for contributing to our activities through your active participation and in particular for being here today.

My remarks will now cover three points:

- the responsibilities of different stakeholders;
- the role of standards and regulations;
- my expectations from this International Conference.

Responsibilities of different stakeholders

Intergovernmental organizations, such as the UNECE, work in partnership with many stakeholders. Their responsibilities in the management of risks are different and complementary:

- Public authorities set out policies – such as public information campaigns on nutrition – and also develop and implement laws, administrative measures and technical regulations.
- Economic operators develop and implement product and procedural standards to systematically mitigate risks that may affect products' quality and thus business' brands and reputation or business operations, causing harm to personnel and property.
- Consumers are also taking an increasingly active role. Several magazines and television programmes, as well as Internet forums, compare similar products from competing brands.

A number of books have been written, and many events organized on the topic before us today. Yet there has been little effort so far, at an international level, to build on the strengths and expertise of all the relevant stakeholders in assessing and managing risks.

We hope that this Conference will provide an occasion for national and regional authorities, businesses, professional risk management organizations, standards development bodies and academia to bring their views forward. Developing a shared approach and a common “language” is the best guarantee of enhanced safety for consumers and workers, a well-preserved natural environment, and resilient business organizations.

Standards and regulations as risk mitigation tools

I am going to turn now to the specific role of technical regulations and voluntary standards. Public authorities and standardization bodies develop these tools with the goal of changing the behaviour of economic operators.

Taken collectively, these instruments contribute to enhancing the safety of products and services and the stability of processes within organizations. They help minimize the probability that things will go wrong and help minimize the impact of any accidents that may occur.

Please allow me to illustrate this idea with an example. When our children play with toys, our first expectation, as parents, is that these toys are safe. Yet, only a few years ago, a popular construction toy that had been sold to millions of US households revealed a basic defect. The toy consisted of tiny but powerful magnetic parts in combination with large plastic building pieces, which could be connected together to form various geometric shapes and structures. Manufacturers had overlooked the danger that magnets could fall off the plastic pieces. A number of injuries, including one casualty, were then reported as children accidentally swallowed the tiny magnets.

While accidents with toys are still relatively frequent, thankfully casualties are rare. In the European Union, no fatal accidents related to use of toys have been reported in the European Injury Database since 2002. This is in no small part the result of a well-defined and properly implemented system of national and European regulations, based on and complemented by international and also national standards.

While this achievement is important, we should appreciate that compliance is very costly for economic operators. For this reason, it is important that regulations be proportional to the risks they set out to address.

My expectations from this Conference

This takes me to the third and last point that I would like to address: my expectations from the Conference, and from its three sessions.

The first session will address how to use risk assessment in deciding whether to regulate, and in the choice of regulatory tools. I hope your deliberations will provide guidance to member States in setting up an appropriate regulatory toolbox, one that adequately protects from hazards, but does not stifle innovation and entrepreneurship.

In the second session, experts will discuss the idea that when an accident occurs in an industrial plant or when substandard products make it to the shelves of supermarket chains, this is generally the by-product of failures within the economic operators' own internal control systems.

So in this second session, I would like you to reflect upon the following questions: What tools do managers have at their disposal to optimize managerial controls in the face of hazards? What can authorities learn from business operators? How can we increase the efficiency of regulations, by sharing responsibilities between business and authorities on the basis of managers' best practice?

In the third session, we will look at the implementation of standards and technical

regulations. Certification, registration, and conformity assessment are among the tools used by Governments and economic operators to ensure compliance before a product is placed on the market.

Market surveillance activities have the same objective, but are performed when products are already on the market. These activities - which require active cooperation with economic operators - include inspections at sales points, withdrawal from the market of goods found not to be in conformity, and the destruction of unsafe products, among others.

Risk management tools can be used effectively to ensure that the controls put in place by market surveillance authorities and conformity assessment bodies are planned to minimize costs and ensure the desired objectives in terms of consumer safety. So once more, I hope your discussions will provide clear guidelines to both authorities and business operators.

With these words, I would like to conclude my remarks. My thanks to all of you for being here today, especially those of you, and I know that there are many, who have travelled long distances to be with us. I wish the Conference every success and encourage you all very warmly to contribute actively to the deliberations.
