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Statement

by

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at

the OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension Implementation Meeting

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Keynote speech at opening of meeting

Accomplishments and remaining obstacles, gaps and needs experienced by the OSCE participating States in accomplishing Good Environmental Governance

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

- Our countries, our economies, our people are dependent on the resources that nature gives us. We are also dependent on each other in sharing these natural resources in this globalized, interconnected world. We need to cooperate in the management of natural resources and in tackling environmental threats.
- For example we need to cooperate in addressing air pollution, in sharing water resources, in preventing accidents and in planning economic developments that may threaten our environment. We need to respond at all levels, from local to global. And that means the involvement of numerous stakeholders.
- We therefore need good governance at all levels to address these environmental challenges, to green our economy and to achieve sustainable development. That has been the work of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) for the past 20 to 30 years, supported by a range of environmental treaties and policy instruments and by work with countries in strengthening institutions and capacities.
- Participatory and accountable governance can help make well-informed choices and prevent countries from investments in technologies impacting on development and the environment. Participatory approaches can be applied effectively in different sectors, including water, sanitation, energy, construction and product-related activities. This, in its turn, leads to a better acceptance of the Government's decisions. Ignoring a wide participatory approach can be costly and lead

to instability both for the governments and for businesses, especially in times of financial crisis and resources constraints.

- In this regard, the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (**Aarhus Convention**) and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (**PRTR Protocol**) are highly relevant today as instruments to respond to modern challenges, such as investment policies, greening the economy and designing and implementing the post-2015 agenda.
- While the last two decades have witnessed increased attention to environmental issues, the efficiency of governance on environmental matters could still be significantly improved. The environmental part of policies remains arguably the weakest of the three pillars of sustainable development.
- There are different levels of implementation of the Convention and its Protocol across the region with a number of achievements that we can celebrate and challenges we should follow closely.
- Despite the fact that most countries have amended their legislative frameworks to allow the public to participate in a variety of decisions affecting the environment, when it comes to the practice, in a number of countries, public participation does not appear to be an every-day exercise and this requires serious attention.
- Countries should strive for full implementation of public participation in decision-making by ensuring meaningful and early participation, the availability of relevant documents to the public, effective means of notification and sufficient time frames during the decision-making to assist the public. A formalistic approach to public participation should be eliminated.

- Both developed countries and countries with economies in transition have increased the volume and variety of environmental information that can be accessed through electronic means. At the same time, unjustified restrictions on access to environmental information and limited capacity to provide effective online access still remain challenges in this field.
- In an effort to support the implementation of the Convention and provide members of the public with practical resources to exercise their environmental rights under the Aarhus Convention, OSCE has founded a network of Aarhus Centres. Aarhus Centres and OSCE are key partners of UNECE in developing capacities and raising awareness. There are currently 43 Aarhus Centres in 13 countries. These serve as an essential resource base for spreading environmental democracy and a valuable multiplier of the Aarhus Convention's principles.
- The valuable cooperation between OSCE and UNECE promotes effective environmental governance, which is a topic often at the heart of environment and security.
- The UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, widely known as **Espoo Convention**, and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment are to date the sole international binding instruments on environmental assessment.
- The Espoo Convention requires that the environmental impact of certain activities be assessed at an early stage of the decision-making. It further builds on transboundary consultations, public participation and inter-state cooperation to address environmental challenges. The Convention demonstrates a practical approach to good environmental governance across borders. With application of the Convention to over a thousand development activities over the past 15 or more years, an important body of international good practice has developed, followed both by Parties and other States in our region.

- A first amendment was adopted in 2001 to make this treaty available to all Member States of the United Nations. Although that amendment has entered into force, a number of ratifications are missing for the amendment to become operational. I encourage OSCE Parties that were Parties to the Espoo Convention in 2001 to ratify the first amendment.
- Although the Convention is an effective tool at the level of development activities, it was soon recognized that higher-level plans and programmes often set the framework for future activities and that a strategic environmental assessment – or SEA – can prevent actions that may be irreversible at a later stage. The Protocol on SEA was adopted to complement the Espoo Convention and calls for the evaluation of environmental, including health, effects as early as the conception of draft plans and programmes. Providing specific guidance on the steps of an SEA procedure, it emphasizes consultations and public participation, so contributing also to good environmental governance.
- The UNECE is currently supporting the implementation of the SEA Protocol and the Espoo Convention in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in the context of the *EaP GREEN Programme* on Greening the Economies in the Eastern Neighbourhood. With the financial support of the EU and in partnership with OECD, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, UNECE strives to promote clearly defined legislation and strong institutional structures in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The intention is to assist a transition to green economy and achieve sustainable development.
- The **UNECE Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents** is designed to protect people and the environment against industrial accidents. It promotes active international cooperation between countries, before, during and after an industrial accident. As such, the Convention promotes good environmental governance through enhancing the coordination between institutions, industry and the public – at the national level, as well as the transboundary level. The sharing of information across national boundaries, for example with regard to the

hazardous activities that could have transboundary effects, often poses a challenge, as does the involvement of the public, including in neighbouring countries and those potentially affected by industrial activities.

- I would like to encourage UNECE member countries – all from the OSCE region – to further engage in efforts to improve their governance in the area of industrial accident prevention, preparedness and response. The Industrial Accidents Convention with its Assistance Programme provides a framework to support national efforts to strengthen the implementation and enforcement of industrial safety – for the sake of improving the protection of human health and the environment of citizens in our region.
- UNECE stands ready to strengthen its cooperation with OSCE in this area, jointly through the Environment and Security Initiative and by cooperating with the Aarhus Centres throughout the region.
- UNECE has two intergovernmental legal instruments that provide crucial frameworks for **water governance** in the pan-European region and beyond:
- The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes – or the Water Convention – is an important legal framework for improving water governance and integrated water resources management, in particular at the basin level. It strengthens transboundary water cooperation and measures for the ecologically-sound management and protection of transboundary surface waters and groundwaters. The Convention requires intersectoral cooperation, public participation, transparency through data exchange for example and much more. The Convention not only provides an intergovernmental forum for discussing transboundary water cooperation and sharing good practices, but also supports countries through assessment, capacity-development, guidance and projects on the ground.

- Many of these projects are carried out in cooperation with OSCE, for example in the Dniester River Basin, shared by Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova where UNECE and OSCE have for several years supported countries in the framework of the Environment and Security Initiative to improve their water cooperation. This led to the development and signature of the bilateral Dniester Treaty in November 2012. I sincerely hope that this treaty will soon be ratified by Ukraine and can then enter into force.
- Another example is the Chu Talas Basin shared by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where the first and still only bilateral river basin commission in Central Asia has been established, with the support of UNECE, OSCE and many other partners.
- Numerous challenges and pressures make good governance and transboundary cooperation in the UNECE and OSCE region difficult, notably climate change. For this reason, UNECE and OSCE as well as other international organizations, are working together to support countries to cooperate when developing adaptation strategies and measures, for example in the shared basins of the Chu Talas, Dniester and Neman. These examples show that cooperation at the technical level can also foster improved cooperation and water governance at the basin level, with ultimate benefits for security, socio-economic development and sustainability.
- UNECE will continue cooperating with OSCE in promoting water security and water governance. We look forward to working together especially in 2015 when OSCE's economic and environmental work under Serbia's presidency will focus on water governance and when the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention, to be held in November 2015 in Budapest, will provide a major intergovernmental platform for discussing and advancing water cooperation.
- The Water Convention is supplemented by a Protocol on Water and Health that aims to protect human health and well-being by better water

management, including the protection of water ecosystems, and by preventing, controlling and reducing water-related diseases. It is the first international agreement of its kind adopted specifically to attain an adequate supply of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone. Parties to the Protocol commit to setting targets in relation to the entire water cycle.

- The Protocol on Water and Health recognizes that access to information and public participation is essential. It builds public awareness of issues related to water and health. The Protocol specifically commits its Parties to making appropriate provisions for public participation, within a transparent and fair framework, and ensuring that due account is taken of the outcome of the public participation while setting targets to ensure a high level of protection against water-related disease, when developing water-management plans and when reviewing and assessing progress. Numerous countries have followed this path with the assistance of the Protocol's joint secretariat, provided by UNECE and the WHO Regional Office for Europe. For example, we are about to assist Serbia with the setting of its targets in a participatory process and working with the Republic of Moldova and many national stakeholders in implementing measures to achieve its targets.
- The experience under that Protocol is that public participation can be hard to achieve due to a lack of awareness among the public of its rights and among the public authorities of their obligations, as well as the lack of national legal frameworks and cross-sectoral cooperation. There may also be political reluctance to engage the public, lack of access to information and budgetary constraints to running public-participation processes.
- However, public participation gives the public the opportunity to express its concerns. It also enables public authorities to take due account of such concerns, which is vital to enhancing the quality and the implementation of the decisions adopted to improve access to drinking water and sanitation and to protect human health.

- That conclusion can be drawn under much of UNECE's work on environmental governance: yes, there are gaps in implementation and capacity needs. But the good governance practices that the UNECE policy instruments introduce and define have enormous benefits in terms of well-informed decision-making. Good decisions lead to actions that can be implemented effectively and efficiently – actions that have public support and foster sustainable development. Good environmental governance is in everyone's interest.
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