



Third meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, Madrid, 26-28 November 2003

Opening statement by Kaj Bärlund, Director,
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It is a great pleasure for me to address this third meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes here in Madrid.

“We must spare no effort” - according to the United Nations Millennium Declaration - “to free all of humanity, and above all our children and grandchildren, from the threat of living on a planet irredeemably spoilt by human activities, and whose resources would no longer be sufficient for their needs”.

Within this declaration, the heads of State and Government also established an ambitious goal: “to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources by developing water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels, which promote both equitable access and adequate supplies”.

Indeed, the Water Convention is a powerful regional instrument to counteract a looming water crisis. But to achieve its goals, it has to be properly utilized and be kept high on the political agenda. Provided that Governments comply with its provisions, adhere to the decisions made and adapt their joint work to the changing conditions and priorities in the region, the Convention will retain its value.

The Convention has been a key driving force for international cooperation on transboundary waters in the pan-European context over a period of more than 10 years, and there are many opportunities for the future.

Let me give you some prominent examples:

- The recent analysis on water and sanitation, which is before you, reports on achievements since the Rio Conference in 1992 and points to challenges to meet the Millennium Development Goals in Europe, too. Many of them require a deepening of cooperation under the Convention and its Protocols on Water and Health and Civil Liability; it seems to me that some issues even call for the development of new protocols to the Convention, such as on sustainable flood prevention.
- The EU Water Framework Directive, adopted shortly after the second meeting of the

Parties is not only a challenge for Western Europe. Its objective “to contribute to the implementation of Community obligations under international conventions on water protection and management, notably the United Nations Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes” is both a commitment and a challenge to assist the Water Convention’s bodies to prevent, control and reduce transboundary impact on the fringe of an enlarged EU area and beyond, particularly the countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. And there is a proposal before this Meeting, to redesign the Convention’s working groups to make maximum use of the Directive’s and the Convention’s experience in implementation projects in the East.

- The growing recognition of the Water Convention’s work by UN agencies and countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and the increasing involvement of the secretariat in implementation projects, both within and outside the UNECE region is another example.
- The International Water Assessment Centre in the Netherlands established at the second meeting of the Parties has become a recognized partner of the European water community and has been undertaken valuable work within the scope of the Convention, the EU Water Initiative and global water programmes. We need the support of all of you to maintain the functions of this centre and to increase its outreach in view of the expected decisions of the UNECE Forum on Sustainable Development in January 2004 and the subsequent meeting of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in April next year.
- The involvement of the private sector in our activities is another example. Those of you who participated in the second meeting of the Signatories to the Protocol on Water and Health witnessed a process that is unique for environmental conventions: the offer of the private sector to assist us in our common task – the protection of the water environment. Concrete action has already been taken, among them the support provided by Danish and Russian private entities on water and sanitation as well as in the protection of industrial accidents.

Mr. Chair,

Many Parties to the Convention have seen this instrument as a pan-European platform to foster dialogue on water, human health and sanitation between politicians, decision-makers, water experts and lawyers on the one hand, and stakeholders, including NGOs and the private sector, on the other.

The Protocol on civil liability and compensation for damage was the result of this joint work, just to refer to one of the outstanding achievements.

The report on activities carried out since the second meeting also reflects a remarkable shift towards the practical implementation of the new water policy through pilot projects and the

organization of workshops and training courses.

However, there are still Parties, both from the West and the East, that do not participate in our joint programmes and rarely attend the Convention's meetings. They will share with us their reasons so that we can adapt our approaches to meet their concerns and ideas.

Countries from the East often do not have the financial means to come to our meetings; and the Parties should agree on a new policy for travel support by using the Water Convention's trust fund and making contributions to it. This would permit recipient countries to commit themselves to the joint work. Not only should they actively participate in the discussions in our meetings; they should also be able to take on practical responsibilities, such as the hosting of workshops and training courses.

Mr. Chair,

We have never considered cooperation on transboundary waters as a sectorial issue. Decision-making on transboundary waters can only be the result of a strategic interaction between multiple interdependent actors. The implementation of decisions can only be successful if there is trust and mutual understanding. I am convinced that our pan-European partnership will foster trust and dialogue among national and local Governments, joint bodies, business and industry, NGOs, and the scientific community.

To attract continuing political attention to the tasks ahead, and to keep the improvement of the water environment and the protection of human health and safety as an important issue on the political agenda, we will need a good understanding of what is at stake at the policy level in Governments. We need to link a water problem to a policy priority, and we need political support to effectively implement the policy.

With the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the Third World Water Forum and the Ministerial Conference, the G8 summit and the Dushanbe International Water Forum, the global community, including the highest level of political decision-making, is now sensitised to the problems that face us as a result of the unsustainable use of waters and the failure to protect the ecosystems of our rivers and lakes.

Basically, we do not need additional resolutions, but a translation of available declarations to action on the ground. We know what to do and how to do it, now we have to show that we are prepared to take decisive steps to do it.

One of the problems, frankly, is that we do not always have the courage to look for the reasons why declarations and recommendations are not being implemented, thus preventing us from further developing the mechanism under the Convention and its Protocols. A much stronger role and commitment of the Convention's bodies, particularly its Bureau, are needed; and the secretariat welcomes the outcome of the last Bureau meeting to this effect.

Mr. Chair,

The secretariat in the preparations for the Regional Implementation Forum on Sustainable Development in Geneva on 15-16 January 2003 has made available to you an in-depth analysis of achievements on water and sanitation since the 1992 Rio Conference. The analysis shows clearly what has been achieved, but it also shows that much remains to be done in the region to implement action called for by the Heads of States and Governments, including the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Not only should the Meeting of the Parties be guided by this analysis. The Parties should agree on their concrete involvement in the Regional Implementation Forum and the 12th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and regard the decisions of these meetings as a matter of priority for the Convention's work.

Six more countries have ratified the Convention since the second meeting of the Parties in March 2000, thus increasing the number of Parties to 35. With these ratifications, these countries have complied with the promise they made in the Declaration of The Hague. And I would sincerely like to express my appreciation to them.

Still, there are 17 more countries in the region that share their waters with their neighbours, but are not yet Parties to the Convention, among them 2 in North America, 4 in the Balkans and 6 in the Caucasus and Central Asia. All of them have established or are in the process of establishing, in one way or another, regimes with their neighbours on transboundary water issues, but I believe that most of them would benefit from being part of the regular work under the Convention.

Consequently, the Conference on sustainable water management in Europe, hosted by the Polish Government in 2002 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Convention, agreed that more should be done so that these countries would ratify the Convention soon.

As concerns the countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as South East Europe concrete action is needed without delay. The draft programme on integrated water resources management in EECCA countries, developed by the secretariat, is, we believe, the right way to go. Not only does it show the assistance programmes already under way; it also proposes projects to fill the still existing gaps. These proposals are fully in line with the Partnership on Water for Sustainable Development, launched by the EU in Johannesburg and further developed at a high-level meeting in Moscow and the Kiev Ministerial Conference. I am looking forward to the discussion of these proposals during this meeting. We need the support and commitment of all – from Western Europe, but, in particular, from the EECCA countries themselves.

When taking action on water and sanitation issues, we should not limit ourselves to traditional partners. We should cooperate with the other 23 UN entities, including the regional commissions and specialized agencies involved in water issues. We should also invite other

UN members States, as appropriate.

We can share with them a wealth of experience: the work on indicators for the water sector lead by UNECE and its International Water Assessment Centre, and the work on groundwater management in Latin America – a cooperative programme with UNESCO and the International Association of Hydrogeologists are just examples. We can also learn from our new partners, particularly regarding win-win solutions in the field of water and energy as well as allocation of water among competing users.

I strongly believe that opening up the Water Convention to the other UN member States as proposed by the Government of Switzerland would provide more cooperation opportunities. This would be a concrete sign that we see ourselves as part of a broader international community, even if, of course, the main focus of our work remains in the UNECE region.

The Water Convention is the parent Convention of the Protocol on Civil Liability, which already contains such a provision. Moreover, UNECE countries share their environment with bordering countries outside the region; this amendment would also make it possible to implement one of the objectives of the plan of implementation of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, namely the elaboration by 2005 of plans for integrated water management on the basis of river basins. A rapid deposition of the instruments of acceptance would, without doubt, contribute to compliance with the Johannesburg objectives.

Mr. Chair,

Our host country, Spain, as well as Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, the Russian Federation, Slovakia and Switzerland have been the most visible contributors to our work. But I shall also mention Denmark, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the many other countries and international governmental and non-governmental organizations and the private sector, which were not in the limelight; although they played a decisive role in the implementation of projects under the Convention. Experts from these countries, organizations and entities have become respected members of our working bodies. They clearly have much experience on water and sanitation. It is heart-warming to notice their strong commitment to assist our joint water-related work.

I would sincerely like to thank our hosts, the Government of Spain and the Vice-Chairman of the Bureau of the Meeting of the Parties, Mr. Manuel Varela, for arranging this meeting. I, for one, certainly look forward to further active work by Spanish experts and the continued solid support of the Spanish Government for ECE's environmental efforts.