

**Opening Statement by Norwegian Minister of Health and Care Services Mr. Bent Høie
at the Third Session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health.**

Oslo, 25. – 27. November

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, Government officials, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to welcome you on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services to Oslo and the Third Session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health.

Access to clean drinking water and appropriate sanitation are basic human needs which concerns all people. It is recognized as a human right by the United Nations General Assembly and it is one of the Millennium Development Goals. Target 7.C of these goals reads: “Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.”

Globally many achievements have been made, however, in 2011 19 million people in the pan-European region still did not have access to improved water sources and 67 million people lacked access to improved sanitation facilities. More than 13.000 children under the age of 14 dies every year from water related diarrhoea in our region. At the same time Europe is now the only continent in the world where progress concerning sanitation challenges seems to be slowing down. These facts represent tremendous challenges in terms of burden of disease, stress to the health care systems as well as in terms poverty and inequality in access to water and sanitation services. I am therefore convinced that water and sanitation will be an important element of the post 2015 goals as well.

In this perspective the Protocol on Water and Health gives us an opportunity. It offers a framework to analyze our national situation and identify our challenges, and helps focus the attention of decision makers to actions that are needed. In the commitment to act section of the Parma Declaration on Environment and Health (2010), the Protocol is mentioned as a tool where it reads: “We will take advantage of the approach and provisions of the Protocol on Water and Health as a rationale and progressive tool to develop integrated policies on water resource management and health, addressing the challenges to safe water services posed by climate change, with clear targets and objectives, working in partnership with all concerned sectors.” in the aim to “... provide each child with access to safe water and sanitation in homes ... kindergartens, child care centres, schools, health care institutions.”

Looking at the situation from a Norwegian perspective, our country has numerous raw water resources available. In fact, if we collect all water for drinking water use before it runs into the ocean - we can supply almost the whole world! Most of the sources are lakes and rivers and generally the water is of good quality.

However, challenges still remain. Our water and wastewater pipes are too old and causing leaking problems. Renewal of pipes is in general far too slow. Some of our smaller public water supply systems are not up to modern hygienic standards and about 10 % of the population get their water supply from smaller private systems, with very little known about the drinking water quality.

Climate change is likely to affect the quality of the surface water and subsequently the functioning of both the water- and sanitation pipe systems. The discharges from combined overflow systems are likely to increase. As water from more heavy rain will enter the sewerage systems, the discharge from treatment plants is also likely to increase. We need to be prepared for the serious effects this might cause. The burden of disease caused by all these factors combined, is largely unknown and represents in itself a challenge.

Norway has taken active part in the work of the Protocol on Water and Health because we believe it is a useful tool in addressing national challenges and for international cooperation. The proposal for an “action plan” with ”national targets” under the Protocol on Water and Health has long been prepared and we hope to see it adopted soon. We want to continue to promote safe drinking water directly from the tap for all people.

On the international scene we have tried to contribute in the different work program areas of the Protocol such as disease reduction, small scale systems and in facilitating financing options for countries that need assistance in order to establish Protocol targets and implementing them. We do this because we see that through participation in the Protocol mechanisms there is much to be gained.

This conference offers an excellent opportunity to discuss the challenges we have in areas like reducing the burden of water-related diseases, secure equitable access to water and sanitation, improve water management and establish sustainable international cooperation.

Norway will continue to actively support the work of the Protocol also in the following years, trusting that this will contribute to the achieving the international goals and human rights mentioned. I invite all other countries, parties and non-parties, as well as NGO's present to do the same. With joint efforts we can realize the potential of the Protocol on Water and Health, with its ambitious yet realistic goals, as an effective and practical tool to bridge the gap and advance access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation services.

And with this I wish you three excellent working days here in Oslo.

Thank you!