



Mr. Didier EYSSARTIER

Deputy Health's General Director

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Opening Speech

*of the activities of the workshop
relating to the equitable access to water*

Misters the Secretaries of State, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

First of all, let me welcome you in France on behalf of the Ministry of Health, Youth and Sport, and hope that your stay in Paris, in addition to study, will also be pleasant.

Today, we are here gathered under the patronage of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organisation, within the framework of the Protocol on water and health during the Convention 1992 on the protection and use of cross-frontier watercourses and international lakes, to work around a specific theme of the Protocol: the issue on the equitable access to drinking water and sanitation.

This issue is prominent in the Protocol, and may even be its core. Thus, sections 5 and 6, which present the main orientations and objectives to reach, mention that an equitable access to drinking water and sanitation should be guaranteed to all. Why does the Protocol on water and health, mostly devoted to the protection against water-related diseases, the management of the water resource and the issues on sustainable development, as revealed in its title, include this aspect? The answer is simple: drinking water and appropriate sanitation are crucial. The access to water is essential to life; it constitutes a condition of the development. And with no access to sanitation of high quality, the water-related diseases develop; typhoid,

cholera, diarrhoea concern and kill the most vulnerable populations. So, 8 million people throughout the world (the half for children), most of them in Africa or Asia, die every year from water-related diseases, making the latter the first cause of world mortality. But beyond these dramatic health consequences of an insufficient access to water, we should also mention the economic and social consequences resulting from these diseases.

The international community gets more and more the measure of the dramatic consequences of an insufficient access to water, and part of the efforts of the aid to development focuses on issues related to water and sanitation. As an example, France, concerned about providing cooperation within that field to the most disadvantaged countries, has been leading for several years a concrete action on that matter. Thus, the French government took in 2003 the decision of doubling its public aid to development within the water field. France currently allocates 368 million euros per year to the water sector at the international level and this amount should increase again within the next years. In 2005, sanitation was identified as a priority action main line, with the access to drinking water and the integrated management of the water resources. The co-development actions within those fields multiply.

But this theme not only concerns the countries the most far from us, or the poorest, and its meaning is fully revealed within the framework of the Protocol field. Signatory countries are actually also concerned, to

various extents, by the problems resulting from an insufficient access to water.

Thus, the alarming statement of fact was made in last January during the first meeting of the parties to the Protocol, that despite the progresses already made, 16% of the WHO European area's inhabitants still have no access to drinking water of good quality, which involves the death of 37 children per day, mostly in the rural areas in East Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. In these areas, poverty added to geographical difficulties make the accessibility to water and sanitation hard, both geographically and economically, for populations, with the dramatic consequences we just mentioned.

The richer countries in West Europe – like France – are also concerned by issues related to the access to water, to different extents of course, different but not inconsiderable. In these countries, geographic or social problems may also hinder the access to water for a swathe of the population. Solutions have been introduced, which will be presented this morning by the interveners, to solve these problems. I can already say, for example, that the connections to the network in remote rural areas are complicated and expensive and, consequently, systems of transfers or geographical prices balancing out have been introduced to guarantee reasonable prices for the concerned populations. At the social level, disadvantaged people in extreme precariousness in France as elsewhere are sometimes threatened to be deprived of essential services, including the access to

water, and systems have been implemented or are at work in order to avert water cuts with social consequences sometimes dramatic.

As I just rapidly mentioned it, we cannot reach the main objective of the Protocol without endeavouring to prior ensure the access to drinking water and sanitation for the whole population. Huge efforts are still to be made within that field and then it is more than never necessary to focus together on these issues of accessibility to water. These issues are complex because the taking, treatment and distribution of drinking water, on the one hand, and the collection and the handling of waste water, on the other hand, are not free. To ensure all these services, we have to finance them. One the crucial stakes is to find a way for this financing to guarantee both the quality and durability of the service, and an access for everyone, the urban and the rural populations, the richest and the poorest.

Here and there, solutions exist and are implemented. Now, it deals with identifying them, analysing their impact, learning from it and listing the good practices which have proved their worth. This is the purpose of this workshop. France undertook, during the elaboration and the endorsement of the Work Programme 2007-2009, and within the framework of point III of this work programme (“Experiences sharing”), to be the leader as regards the access to water and sanitation theme and, first, to organise this workshop. We are pleased we fulfilled this commitment.

Together, we will today exchange our national experiences, good or less good, we will learn from what has been successful and what has failed, from what is economically feasible and socially favourable and what is less so. I would like to emphasize that we have here an exceptional opportunity to gather experts representing the European region of the UN/ECE in its whole diversity and richness of experiences, and I would like to thank the experts, particularly those from Central and East Europe, and Caucasus, for having accepted our invitation and for having joined us to share their national experiences. I am sure that we will take a huge advantage from the exchanges of today. Tomorrow, the project of questionnaire you have been given will be discussed, particularly in the light of what will be told during the presentations. A final document will be elaborated thanks to your contributions, and then it will be distributed to all our partners. The answers to that questionnaire will then be collected and exploited. These elements, in addition to the learning from the presentations of today will allow us establishing a guideline of good practices, which will hopefully allow progressions within the field of the access to water for all in our countries.

Finally, I repeat the commitment already made by France during the First Meeting of the Parties, to get deeply involved on a long-term basis in the activities, for which we are today preparing the ground.

Before handing over to the presentations, I would warmly thank:

- The UN/ECE, the Secretariat of the Protocol and, in particular, Mrs. BERNARDINI for her permanent support and her sound advice during the preparation of the seminar
- Misters Peter BORKEY and Alexander MARTOUSSEVITCH from the OECD who also provided us with sound advice and who kindly assured the communication of the information relating to this seminar towards numerous experts from East Europe and Caucasus
- The Academy of Water, and in particular Mr. Henry SMETS who have also been very helpful, particularly for the drawing up of the project of questionnaire, and made us benefit from his expertise within the field of the right to water
- The International Office for Water, and in particular Mr. CHANTREL who co-organises this event with the Ministry of Health
- I repeat my thanks to the numerous experts who have accepted to take an active part in this seminar, and particularly to those who will make presentations today. Thanks to their dynamism and their quality works, a large sample group of European countries is represented. Your presence contributes, I hope, to the future success of your works. I deeply thank you for your invaluable contribution and wish you good luck for the next days, which will be busy, actually, but certainly fruitful.