



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

22ND OSCE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM

“Responding to environmental challenges with a view to promoting co-operation and security in the OSCE area”

FIRST PREPARATORY MEETING

Vienna, 27-28 January 2014

Opening Remarks

Secretary General Lamberto Zannier

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I warmly welcome all of you to Vienna to the First Preparatory Meeting of the 22nd OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum devoted to addressing the challenges of managing natural disasters in the OSCE area.

1. As a security organization, the OSCE must acknowledge the fact that natural disasters affect the security of nations and individuals. Disasters injure and kill people, damage homes and infrastructure, and undermine key sectors of the economy. Their consequences can fuel tensions and lead to conflicts within and among societies. This is why trans boundary co-operation on preparedness and response to natural disasters is important not only as a tool to address the immediate consequence of the disaster, but also as a co-operative and a confidence-building measure aimed at avoiding the risk of tension and conflict.

2. In fact, natural disasters know no borders. Since the year 2000, almost half of the world's population has been affected by them. More than one million people have lost their lives. Disasters have proven to be able to wipe out decades of progress – disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable categories: the poor, women, children, the elderly, youth and people with disabilities.

In an interconnected world, even disasters of local nature can have far-reaching consequences. Let me remind you, for instance, of the earthquakes, tsunami and floods that hit the OSCE Asian Partners for Co-operation Japan and Thailand in 2011 and their impact also on the people and economies of faraway countries.

3. Within the OSCE area, natural disasters also pose significant transboundary risks. To mention just a few examples, participating States in Central Asia, South Caucasus, Southern Europe, North America and some regions of the Russian Federation face serious seismic hazards. Wildfires occur frequently in the South Caucasus, the Russian Federation, Belarus and Ukraine as well as in North America and Southern Europe, and at times across borders between states.

The OSCE region is also vulnerable to water-related transboundary risks, including a shortage of water. For instance, the multi-year droughts at the beginning of the last decade in Central and South-west Asia and the Caucasus affected some 60 million people and caused significant economic losses. Too much water can be of equal concern: less than a year ago, in June 2013, heavy rainfall over Europe caused rivers to burst their banks, causing disasters that affected several countries, including our host country, Austria. Tens of thousands of people had to be evacuated and the combined economic loss amounted to the equivalent of 17 billion euros.

In addition, climate change, coupled with rapidly increasing rates of urbanization, makes the impact of disasters much worse. The frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters have been increasing in different parts of the world in the past two decades. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has forecasted that climate-related disasters will increasingly become a global challenge of the twenty-first century, affecting security world-wide.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Responding to natural disasters requires fostering local, national and international capacities for prevention, preparedness, early warning, and response.

With its comprehensive and cross-dimensional approach to security, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is well placed to contribute to the international community's efforts to improve co-operation on disaster risk reduction. The OSCE's broad membership, with its 57 participating States, enables us to support co-operation, and share experiences and best practices within and between OSCE sub-regions.

In the OSCE context, the importance of co-operation on natural and man-made disasters for the security in our region was already recognized in the Helsinki Final Act, which identified meteorology, hydrology and seismological research as important areas of co-operation; a number of subsequent OSCE documents have also highlighted the need for co-operative efforts in dealing with disasters.

Today, as we move towards the 40th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, enhancing the strategic orientation of the economic and environmental dimension is one of the key

areas of focus of our discussions, as we seek to enhance the Organization's ability to effectively address contemporary security challenges. The Forum can make a substantial contribution to this process by identifying possible roles for the OSCE in disaster risk reduction that build on the discussions that took place under the Lithuanian Chairmanship on challenges posed by natural and man-made disasters, and on the Decision on the Protection of Energy Networks from Natural and Man-made Disasters adopted at the Kiev Ministerial Council.

As many of you know, I am a firm advocate of strengthening links between the Organization and Track II initiatives to introduce different perspectives and fresh ideas into OSCE debates. Finding solutions to environmental challenges requires participatory processes involving civil society, experts and academia, among others. I also believe that this is an area in which greater co-operation is needed among regional organizations. This is why this year's main Security Days event in May, on Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, will explore the role of regional organizations in addressing climate change and natural disasters, among other security challenges. It is also why we are organizing, together with the Swiss Chairmanship, a Security Day on Water in July. I am convinced that these discussions will generate fresh ideas and complement the outcomes of both this Forum and the Helsinki +40 process.

The 22nd Economic and Environmental Forum will help to consolidate a shared view on the possible role of the OSCE, as a regional security organization, in the disaster risk and crisis management cycle. Insights into how the OSCE can create synergies with other actors and mobilize our own tools to address natural disaster risks more effectively could become valuable outcomes of the Forum process. We can also discuss how the OSCE could contribute to the post-2015 UN Sustainable Development Agenda, where disaster risk reduction can become a cross-cutting issue. The Forum's discussions are also relevant to the preparation of the post-2015 framework for disaster risk reduction that will replace the current Hyogo Framework for Action.

In particular, it will be important to consider preventive investments in risk reduction and emergency preparedness, as this has proved to be a cost-effective approach to significantly reducing the impact of natural hazards.

In addition, one should also look at ways to reduce the risks of natural disasters. A multiplicity of actors have a role to play in reducing these risks. By taking the right approach, governments, communities and people can make sure that a coming storm or flood will not turn into a disaster.

And finally, throughout the meeting there should be a strong focus on the role that the OSCE can realistically play in disaster risk management and in fostering co-operation in this field, taking into account the activities of other partner institutions..

In concluding, I wish to express my gratitude to the guest speakers and to all participants for joining us here in Vienna to take an active part in our deliberations. I look forward to your discussions over the next two days, and especially to practical suggestions to further develop the OSCE's role in this important area.

Thank you.