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Turning Political Commitments into Action

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to take a moment by highlighting that the work the Bureau fulfilled in the preparation of the meeting was not an easy task, and that the bureau made every effort to achieve a successful and meaningful outcome. It has become apparently clear that the outcome of the CSD is just as good as the work of the people involved in it. The decisions we take are our messages to the outside world - messages required to be clear, easy to understand, feasible in practice and effective.

In addition to the statement made by Luxemburg on behalf of the European Union, to which Austria fully aligns herself, I would like to stress a number of key points reminding us all of three reasons why we are here.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Reason number one: Political signals do have an impact.

In particular the water sector is a perfect example of what can be achieved when politicians send the right signals. In the 80ies, we were confronted with major deficits in providing access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation services to the poor. However, there was a significant lack in the awareness of these deficits and of the significance of water as source for life, as essential for human health, food production and social and economic development.

The moment we became aware of these deficits, we were able to send the right political signals at a number of occasions: at the Rio Summit, in the elaboration of Agenda 21, at Rio+5, and again at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. By that we have made a big leap forward along with the adaptation of our development assistance programmes and with the adaptation of national administrations world-wide.

Austria, too, has experienced similar changes in the past. Although being lucky to be situated in an area where water is in abundance, our high water quality standards are only the result of a long learning process. Nowadays, we try to use water in a sustainable and responsible manner. In order to ensure a sustainable water use, we follow an integrated, holistic approach, combining all aspects of water supply and waste water management.

Austria already solved the crucial problems of water supply and waste water treatment successfully in the past. However, due to its geographical and climatic situation, Austria faces specific challenges, such as flood protection and hydro power, which have nowadays to be solved in a sustainable and ecologically acceptable way.

At present, Austria focuses its efforts on integrated water resource management in the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive, while at the same time working with our developing country partners on access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Due to our achieved expertise over the years, water has become a central element of our development assistance, where capacity building is of particular importance to attain our goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sending the right political signals to trigger action is an inherent task of the Commission of Sustainable Development. Finding consensus for this large number of parties involved is so important for ownership - however, makes progress slow at the same time. And yet: progress might be slow, but constant.

Reason number two: The CSD is the motor for global sustainable development.

Our task is to repeat and to state on and on the prerequisites for achieving sustainable development and to create awareness of these prerequisites in other international fora and in the entire UN system. For this, we have been presented with an unique opportunity: the Millennium Review Summit. Environmental Degradation is a threat to peace and security. There can be no development that is not sustainable development incorporating environmental, economic and social aspects alike.

Who is better destined for conveying this very message if not us? We can convey this message through the demonstration of our very own experiences: through the big leap forward we have experienced after the right steps have been taken in the water sector.

Last year's CSD added other pieces falling to place to complete the whole picture and we have gained knowledge on those areas where support needs strengthening. Therefore, we have a second task: We must take these commitments and turn them into action.

Based on our experiences in Austria we are able to demonstrate what we think our actions should look like.

- Integrated water resource management is the most effective and comprehensive way for solving challenges for water and sanitation. The reason for the present situation concerning water and sanitation deficits often results from an unsustainable water management. Therefore it is important to make IWRM better understood and more acceptable.

97 % of the Austrian territory is situated within the Danube River Basin where integrated water resource management represents an issue of considerable relevance in Austria. In relation to the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive, but also in relation to the International Commission for the Protection of the River Danube, Austria has been able to gain considerable experience in integrated water resources management - experience in capacity building which would be a pleasure to us to pass on to other countries. In the field of IWRM, Austria considers capacity building of particular importance; it should focus on policy level and political decision makers, as their support is needed to implement IWRM.

- An important aspect of integrated water management in Austria represents the use of hydro-power plants. The use of hydro power, as a form of renewable energy, has a long tradition in Austria, and represents the basis of Austria's energy supply. In Europe, Austria belongs to the leading countries with energy supply by water power.

Hydro-power is a clean and - due to its renewable nature - sustainable way of producing energy. However, it represents a significant impact to the morphological structure of the water course and its water regime. Therefore, we are aware of the importance that hydro-power constructions are carried out in line with sustainability and ecology targets.

- Generating energy out of hydro-power is a useful contribution to achieving the Kyoto target and allows us to make the link to the upcoming CSD cycle, where energy will be in the centre of discussions. Experiences from many years have permitted us to become a lead in developing sound and environmentally-friendly technologies for achieving integrated water resource management or for constructing power plants.

In the late 1960s, the service gap between sewerage (39% of the population) and waste water treatment (3% of the population) was rather large. As a result, the in-stream conditions of Austria's rivers were worrying. Austria has learned another important lesson with the gradual reduction of surface water pollution, which I would like to share with you.

General market conditions for loans were unfavourable at that time which led to tapping the primarily water-supply oriented, tax-financed Water Management Fund for waste water treatment. The reversal of the down-fall trend had only been possible due to the awareness of the Austrian population of environmental problems and their preparedness to contribute to a long-term solution was crucial for the success of the project.

Water sector development represents an essential element for furthering overall poverty eradication, and that is one declared goal of the Austrian Development Cooperation.

Subsumed under the heading "Water and Health for People", the Austrian Development Cooperation activities emphasise basic water supply and sanitation on communal level especially in rural and peri-urban areas. This is how we are able to address the multi-faceted demand for water.

It is characteristic for the Austrian Development Cooperation activities that regional programmes are favoured rather than isolated projects. The selected partner countries, representatives of the donor community and representatives of the Austrian Development Cooperation work hand in hand to develop initiatives that focus specifically on the needs in the regions.

Of course, the main goal of these water supply and sanitation programmes is to provide water and sanitation in adequate quantity and quality accessible by all people in the region. However, we try and go one step further - towards a sustainable provision of water. Therefore, we have put focus on three more aims within these programmes: water sources must be protected, supply must be secured and implementation of programmes must be affordable and cost-effective in their investment and operation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Reason number three: Serious follow-up keeps sustainable development going and creates confidence, credibility, consistency, and coherence.

Let me make very clear that this reason applies to the sectoral aspects we are dealing with, as well as to the overall sustainable development agenda.

Now that water and sanitation have been promoted by the right political messages, and action has been taken all over the world, logically the need for coherent integration arises. This is where we are standing now: We are now presented by the call for coherence of global monitoring systems and for sharp and meaningful data.

Small donor countries, such as Austria, are in strong favour of ongoing and permanent donor coordination. Donor coordination is vital for achieving more effective results. Donor coordination significantly contributes to avoiding parallel structures and systems. And donor coordination eventually will play a major part in promoting the implementation of our commitments.

In this year 2005, the year of the Millennium Review Summit, we are in the situation where we can counteract negative developments through our lessons learned over the decades. We are in the situation where we can demonstrate what our Declarations and Goals are really worth for.

The year will bring along many changes and new developments. The Millennium Review Summit offers an opportunity to strengthen the entire sustainable development agenda: A welcome opportunity - one not to be missed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is the effectual implementation of our commitments, also from the CSD part, that will add to the credibility of the sustainable development agenda. In this regard, we have to focus on integrating sustainable development in the entire development process. We must state clearly that there is only one form of development: sustainable development.

To repeat once more - it is the effectual implementation of our commitments that will give us the credibility to move forward. I am not drawn between Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. I wish to end by quoting John Locke: "I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts."