Check against delivery!

Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK

SPEECH

Earth Observations for Sustainable Growth and Development

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Ministers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Firstly I would like to thank to Minister Mangena and our South African hosts for their generosity to us here in Cape Town and for the tremendous organisation of this event.

When over 70 nations and 50 international organisations gather together willingly - even enthusiastically - in one place, there are only two things that can be occurring: there is either a major sports tournament or discussions on an important issue of global concern.

Well, Minister Wan has reassured me that the Olympics are not until next year in Beijing, and although we are in the right place for the next soccer World Cup, we are again way too early.

Clearly our mission here is somewhat more serious and our concerns are indeed global. We are all faced with maintaining and improving the standard of living for our citizens, producing or maintaining competitive economies and securing supplies of energy. At the same time – and for the same reasons - it is our duty that we preserve our environment and combat climate change.

The latest planetary health assessment from the UN Environment Programme shows that we now need 1.4 planet Earths to sustain the average lifestyle.

According to the Global Footprint Network, we went into ecological debt on 6 October this year, having consumed more than the planet can regenerate in one year.

Only last week, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change told us that the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is greater than at any time for over 650,000 years.

They told us that 11 of the warmest years since records began have occurred during the last 12 years.

They also told us that during the last century, the increase in average temperature was 0.74 degrees Celsius, the sea level rose on average by 17cm, and a large part of the snow cover of the northern hemisphere has simply melted away.

No matter how you represent it, we're in trouble!

And how do we know all that? We know it because our observations and our scientific models tell us that.

What else do we know?

We know that our observations are not sufficient in their quantity, quality, accuracy or geographical coverage. We know they are stored, handled and documented in ways that make access and use by others difficult. And we know that our scientific understanding and our models need to be improved.

These and other deficiencies are well documented and explain our presence here today. We must base our policies and our actions on sound science and respond to our best understanding of the situation we are facing.

So if sound knowledge is a prerequisite, then routine observations of our planet are not optional. And global observations need global efforts, since they are too important and too difficult for temporary and piecemeal efforts.

In February 2005 at our last summit in Brussels, we decided on our collective response – the creation of the Global Earth Observation System of Systems. Nearly three years later, we have made important progress. The GEO Report on Progress and the exhibition across the road are impressive testaments to that.

The activities being created and being brought together under the GEO umbrella will ultimately lead to wiser decisions by our governments and organisations. These decisions will be in a host of areas that affect the well-being of the planet and its people.

That is why the European Commission is glad to be a leader of the GEO effort. On its behalf I reaffirm our commitment to the GEO enterprise and wholeheartedly endorse the Cape Town Declaration.

Working with the Member States of the European Union we will continue to make substantial contributions to the implementation of the GEOSS. I'd like to mention a few examples:

We in Europe are organising the provision of systematic and operational Earth observation activities through the Global Monitoring for Environment and Security initiative. GMES will not only serve European needs for information services but exchange data with the observation networks of our international partners.

Our directive on Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe (INSPIRE) provides measures for the access, exchange and use of spatial data services in Europe. These measures can contribute to the creation of global standards for the collection, management and sharing of geospatial data and information.

The 7th Framework Programme for Research will continue to support relevant and complementary Earth observation activities in the areas of environment, space activities and information society technologies. Much of these activities are directly intended as contributions to the implementation of the GEOSS. For example, today the European Commission is launching a call for proposals for projects supporting research activities that are of direct benefit to the development of the GEOSS. That brings the value of calls this year in that specific area of the programme to 40 million euros.

The African Monitoring of the Environment for Sustainable Development programme exists to improve decision and policy-making processes for environmental management at national, regional and continental level in Africa. It does this by facilitating access to relevant geo-information and by increasing overall information management capabilities.

In this context, it is great news to learn that Brazil has agreed to free-of-charge distribution of their satellite data to the continent of Africa. In our turn, I would like to announce that the broadcasting of this data will be offered through the GEONETCast system in collaboration with the EUMETSAT organisation.

This topic is not only good news in its own right; it also highlights in a single subject the two areas of perhaps the greatest challenge for the future of the GEOSS: data sharing and capacity building.

Reaching effective agreement on the modalities of international data sharing is essential, and a real breakthrough will be needed. Capacity building – particularly in developing countries - is vital for the availability and successful use of geo-information. Planning and economic development according to local needs, mitigation of climate change effects, and management of natural disasters will require bold contributions.

So despite the good news highlighted in the Report on Progress, we must keep in mind that the majority of the work is still ahead of us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Humanity is facing an enormous test of its stewardship of the Earth. This test will require all our commitment, resourcefulness and ingenuity.

So where we have monitoring systems, let's join them; where we lack systems, let's build them; and where we have data; let's share them.

Creating the GEOSS might not be a sport, but I am proud to be a member of this team!