

Mr. Chairman,  
Distinguished experts,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address this second meeting of the Consultative Working Group of Experts on Biological Diversity Education and Public Awareness. May I at the outset express my gratitude to the Ministry of the Environment of Norway for its generous logistical and financial support, as well as for the organizational arrangements made for this meeting. This support is further testimony to Norway's commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity and to the cause of the global environment and sustainable development in general. I would also like to thank our colleagues in UNESCO for their efforts in preparing for this meeting.

Special words of appreciation go, of course, to all the experts who have given their valuable time to participate in this meeting, and in this process in general, which I believe is of utmost importance to the implementation of the Convention in all countries. The promotion of understanding of the importance of the conservation of biological diversity and its wise use is written into the Convention as an obligation assumed by the Parties. The purpose of this Initiative is to help them discharge that obligation.

It has to be admitted from the outset that knowledge of the concept of biological diversity, let alone its importance, is in generally low. This is all the more striking if we compare the level of knowledge of biological diversity with that of other major environmental issues, such as climate change and ozone depletion. One of the tasks before you is to develop ways in which the message can get across to the widest possible audience in the shortest possible time. And an informed and engaged public is our best ally in efforts to stem the loss of biological diversity. Through the building of public awareness, we can create the sort of enabling environment that will help change destructive practices and facilitate the policy choices that need to be made to achieve the objectives of the Convention.

Your last meeting saw progress in the development of a programme of work. The purpose of the present meeting is to focus on the strategic objectives and means of implementation, bearing in mind that there will be both short-term and long-term elements to the Initiative. I believe it would also be useful to give some thought to the ways in which the success of these activities can be measured. In other words, ways in which we can ascertain whether or not the message is getting through to our target audience and what is the impact of that message on attitudes, practices and public policy.

As you may know, the Conference of the Parties to the Convention has decided to prepare a Strategic Plan for the Convention, which is to be considered and adopted at its next meeting, in April 2002. The Secretariat has already requested input from Parties, Governments and interested organizations, and intends to convene a workshop next month, during the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, to discuss the overall structure of the Plan, promote inputs from Parties and to consider initial submission. We intend to have an initial draft of the Plan available for comment by the end of February next year. The work that you are undertaking goes hand in hand with the development of the Plan. As decided by the

Conference of the Parties, the Working Group should take into account the priorities identified in the Strategic Plan, once it is adopted. At the same time, I believe that this Initiative should be in itself an element of the Plan, and we would welcome your thoughts on the subject.

I am pleased to inform you that the Second Committee of the General Assembly is now considering the suggestion of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention that the date of the International Day for Biological Diversity be changed from 29 December to 22 May, as of next year. The purpose of this proposed change of date is to increase the visibility of the Day, which has hitherto been somewhat obscured by its placement at the end of the calendar year. If this proposal is adopted, as I hope it will be, it will provide the Convention with much more suitable platform from which to launch its public awareness and education activities. I will keep all members of the Committee informed of developments in the General Assembly in this area, and would greatly appreciate receiving your ideas on how we can exploit this opportunity, especially in light of the fact that World Environment Day takes place two weeks later.

I wish you a fruitful and constructive meeting and look forward to its outcome.