Dear Excellency Rob Zeldenrust, Ambassador and Permanent delegate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to UNESCO
Dear Mrs Alwayn, Director from the Ministry of Environment and Infrastructure,
Dear Abiodun Williams, President of the Hague Institute for Global Justice,
Dear Pieter Van der Zaag, Chair of the Dutch IHP Committee
Organizing experts from UNESCO and UNECE,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It is not a matter of coincidence that we are gathered here today in The Hague to contribute to a laudable global effort to improve groundwater governance. We have all chosen to spend the next three days together. Some of us have travelled great distances and others are close to home. Together we will learn from one another, share our experiences and explore new ideas.

It is no coincidence that we are here in the year that has been labelled the International Year of Water Cooperation. And as we all know, cooperation is not always easy. Cooperation is a perpetual and crucial challenge, especially when it comes to an increasingly scarce resource like water. This is even more true for water under the ground. Groundwater represents the sort of setting where neither exclusively public nor exclusively private solutions can solve the governance puzzle. It is the sort of problem that calls for our attention today. In a world where groundwater resources are increasingly under strain because of a growing population with a growing demand for water for intensive agricultural production and
where climate change is yet to manifest its impact, this is the sort of problem that calls for scientists, policy makers and practitioners to get together and come up with shared and innovative solutions. This is the sort of effort that UNESCO was made for. Building peace in the minds of men through knowledge-sharing between a myriad of stakeholders.

It is no coincidence that we are here because water continues to be at the **centre of people’s attention.** Only last month the Right2Water movement became the first ever European Citizens Initiative to reach the milestone of collecting a million signatures of EU citizens. The European Commission will now be legally obliged to set up a formal policy response to address the concerns its citizens have about clean drinking water and quality sanitation inside and outside the European Union.

It is no coincidence that we are here because **The Netherlands by the fate of its geography and history has a rich experience in water governance.** Our low elevation has obliged us to work together and build polders and resist flooding. We are convinced that the vital Dutch expertise that was generated through experience can contribute to this regional stock-taking meeting.

It is no coincidence that we are here because groundwater is intrinsically intertwined **with many global issues,** which affect all of us. For example, as Marc Bierkens, speaker at this conference, has found, unsustainable groundwater extraction totalling two to three hundred cubic kilometres per year turns out to be responsible for a quarter of the sea level rise worldwide. The fact that
groundwater plays such a massive role in rising sea levels represents a terrifying idea for a country like ours, more than a quarter of which lies below sea level and 55 per cent of which is prone to flooding. [For now I can reassure you that, if the levees were to break, the ground on which we stand happens to be above sea level. However you would be unable to catch your plane home, as Schiphol airport lies four meters below sea level.] If pumping up water in one country could be a cause of flooding in another, global action is warranted.

Indeed, it is not a matter of coincidence that we are here today because The Hague has been the global capital of justice for over a century. Almost a hundred years ago the foundations of the Peace Palace were laid in an international effort to build peace through dialogue and to solve conflict through arbitration. What could be a more appropriate place to finish your tour du monde of regional consultations on groundwater governance than the place that hosts scores of international courts of justice and arbitrage? Why, no. It is no coincidence that we are here today at the The Hague Institute for Global Justice, which has so kindly agreed to host this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Bearing in mind that a Framework of Action is to come out of the five groundwater governance regional consultations, my hope is that this 5th Consultation will build bridges between communities of practice and raise awareness about good practices for groundwater governance.
To conclude, I wish to thank all the parties involved in making this conference happen and especially Alice Aureli and Marina Rubio from UNESCO-IHP. And once again, I thank you all for gathering here in The Hague. We are proud to be part of a process that is so big and yet so specific.

Thank you for your attention.