Conference on "Children and Environment", Glasgow

Let me first congratulate the organisers of this 21st edition of this Conference taking place here in Glasgow. The specific theme of children's mobility you have chosen is of particular personal and political interest to me. I would like to build around this theme to speak about the wider context of "Children and Environment".

I will look at the challenges and concerns ahead as well as opportunities for policy initiatives for children and those for children's mobility in particular. Indeed, children are often more vulnerable than adults to environmental problems for a variety of reasons. They are paying the price of unsustainable development policies.

However, the 90 million children we have in Europe are not only to be considered victims of today's environment. They also have a great and untapped potential for creating a better and healthier environment in the future. I know the ambassadorial role children can play for the environment as I've been subject to the pressure of my own two boys!

I believe that we must create a "child friendly" environment. What is good for our children is good for our society. But the reverse is also true what is bad for our children is bad for society. Let me explain what I mean.

The renowned Indian writer Arundhati Roy who wrote « God of the Small Things » - has wisely expressed our dependence on each other:

"Even though we are different countries

We share the same sky,

The same wind and the same water".

We share the same sky, the same wind and the same water with our children. But they are also forced to share the pollutants and environmental changes which we as adults have created, polluted air and water, bad urban environments, the threat from climate change - examples that we all are familiar with.

However, children and youth do not participate in the planning and decision-making. They have very limited possibilities to influence their present and future situation. This means that
we adults have a huge responsibility - a responsibility which we must take much more seriously than we have done to date.

Environmental Risks to Children's Health

Children are probably more exposed to environmental pollution than we are currently aware of. At the earliest stages, the foetus is affected. The protective barrier created by Mother Nature in the form of the placenta no longer provides sufficient protection.

Many environmental pollutants now reach the foetus. DDT, dioxin and Carbon Monoxide are just a few that increase the risk of miscarriages, birth defects and future health problems. Small children up to the age of five are also vulnerable, since their vital organs are not completely developed. The effects of environmental threats leading to health problems are magnified.

The report card on the well being of children is a mixture of success and failure. The mortality rate is at record low, but there have been sizeable increases in chronic respiratory conditions, asthma, infertility and other pathological conditions linked to environmental agents.

I need not go into the medical details today on how children's health is affected by the environment, by different pollutants and dangerous chemicals and substances.

Various research reports are very clear on this and they particularly highlight the exposed situation of children. They are often the first to suffer. And, they are usually unable to protect themselves.

Children eat proportionately more food, drink more fluids and breath more air per pound of body weight than adults. They play outside. And increasingly, we are becoming aware that our environmental norms and standards for exposure were not designed with children in mind. As cyclists, many of you will be aware of the simple fact that child cyclists are generally closer to the source of exhaust fumes than adults! Children's systems are still developing - and we are more aware now of the fact that it is often the timing of exposure to pollutants in the life-cycle than the level itself which is of importance.