Foredragsholder: **Forsknings- og høyere utdanningsminister Tora Aasland**
Arrangement: **Lanseringsarrangement for FN-året for Planeten Jorden (IYPE) i Paris**

Your excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,
It is a great pleasure to take part in the Global Launch Event for the United Nations' International Year of Planet Earth. Today is an important day for the Earth Sciences. The International Year of Planet Earth has a broad, ambitious programme, including both science and outreach. I know that some Planet Earth activities have already started, and the following two years will see many exciting activities, projects and conferences.

Science is in its essence an international and cooperative endeavour. The Earth Sciences underline this in the simple fact that its subject matter, the Earth, is so clearly common to us all. The philosopher Hanna Arendt called the Earth the very quintessence of the human condition. The Earth is our beautiful home, and provides us with food and drink. But the Earth will also present us with danger, for example in the form of volcanoes, landslides, earthquakes and tsunamis. We need knowledge about the Earth, both to take advantage of the rich opportunities it gives us, and to increase security by predicting its dangerous natural disasters and finding safe living environments.

The Norwegian government has decided to give financial support to the international secretariat of the International Year of Planet Earth, which is in fact based in Norway, at the Geological Survey of Norway. The reason behind this decision is of course that we recognize the importance of this International Year focusing on Earth science, initiated by UNESCO and the International Union of Geological Sciences.

The motto of the Year, "Earth Sciences for Society", effectively underlines that a main aim of the International Year of Planet Earth is to increase awareness of the contribution Earth sciences can make to the development of our societies. Sustainable exploration of resources, security and health are just some examples of areas where Earth sciences have an important role to play.

On the one hand, the many Earth scientists of the world have knowledge that could be used more effectively - to save lives, to improve living conditions and to find sustainable solutions for energy supplies, for example. On the other hand, we still need more knowledge, both to solve problems we face today, and to be ready to meet the challenges of the future that we do not yet know. This means that we need more research in Earth Sciences, and more researchers.

I'm confident that the International Year of Planet Earth will contribute to increased interest in Earth sciences, and hopefully it will help recruit students who will become the geoscientists of the future. Let us hope that the year will also contribute to an increased awareness at the political level of the importance of the Earth sciences. The knowledge we already have must be put to use in policy making and administration, and the knowledge we need we can all contribute to secure by supporting research and education in the Earth sciences.

From Norway's point of view, it is easy enough to see that Earth sciences are of great importance to society. Oil and gas are central elements of our economy, and in light of how fundamental geological competence is to the petroleum industry, we could say that Earth sciences is part of "the bedrock" of our society.

As our country is placed in the North, the development in the High North region is very important to us, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The Norwegian government has set the High North as the most important strategic area in the years to come. And knowledge is at the core of our High North policy, in terms of research, education and competence building both in, for, and about the High North.

In this picture too, the Earth sciences play an important role. New opportunities for exploration of oil and gas may be opening up in the High North region, and in this connection we need more knowledge about the seafloor. And talking about oil and gas exploration easily leads to an issue which has been right at the top of the international political agenda for the past year, namely climate change. In climate research as well, Earth Sciences are central, giving information about climate and climate changes in the past, and thus helping scientists improve their understanding of climate changes today and of possible future climate developments.

The Arctic region is particularly important in climate research, since this is where it is expected that the effects of climate change will be greatest and can be observed first - in fact, we can already see them there.

In this context, our location in the High North provides some unique research opportunities which have interest far beyond the northern hemisphere. Svalbard, the Norwegian archipelago including the island of Spitsbergen, is the most accessible High Arctic area in the world, and therefore an attractive research platform. Svalbard is an important arena for climate related research in many disciplines, and geology is among the fields of study that have especially interesting conditions here. Many countries have already established research stations here, and we wish to facilitate the best and most sustainable use of Svalbard as a research platform for the global community.

At present, Svalbard is the location of several projects under the International Polar Year, which is now well under way. The polar year is another international scientific year which underlines the need for international cooperation in the effort to develop the knowledge we need to face global challenges. Many of the Polar Year projects are only made possible by the joining of resources of several countries. Norway plays an active part in the Polar Year.

We consider that we both can and should make a contribution to this global scientific effort, as a nation with a history of polar research and management of polar areas.

We see it as very positive that the International Year of Planet Earth together with the International Polar Year, the Electronic Geophysical Year and the International Heliophysical Year signed the so-called Celimontana Declaration, where common goals and interests were recognized and the aims to communicate and work together were declared.

The Celimontana Declaration illustrates an important point: That different scientific disciplines may complement each other, and together form the basis of an adequate understanding of the challenges we face and the solutions we can turn to. I know that the term “Planet Earth” has been used to designate the year we celebrate today exactly because it indicates that we should adopt a holistic view of our world. The world is undeniably multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, and it is only natural that our approach must be the same.

Natural science has for some time become increasingly specialized and divided into ever more narrowly focused sub-disciplines. On this background, I think it is very interesting to see that the International Year of Planet Earth is advocating a system oriented, holistic approach. The fact that the processes of the Earth are part of a total Earth system, where developments in different regions as well as in different spheres affect each other, points to the truly global dimension of Earth science.

This global dimension also constitutes a challenge to the countries that have high research capacity and the most resources available to invest in research. These countries - Norway being one of them - have a responsibility to contribute to the development of knowledge that is needed in countries with a lower capacity in research and technology.

Unfortunately, it is likely that countries in the south will experience some of the most damaging effects of climate change in the future, both related to rising sea levels and to more extreme weather. Some of these countries are the among the poorest in the world, with limited resources to invest in science and education. If we look at the ten themes chosen for the scientific programme of the International Year of Planet Earth, we see that many of these are of great importance to developing countries. Groundwater, geohazards and resource issues are obvious examples of themes where increased knowledge and improved knowledge dissemination can make a large difference in promoting health, safety and sustainable growth.

The situation today is that the global research effort is very unevenly distributed, with some industrialized countries conducting the greater share of the world's research. Not surprisingly, this has the consequence that most of the research is directed at problems and questions related to the needs of the industrialized countries. In medical research, this is particularly so: it is estimated that as much as 90 percent of the research effort is related to the needs of 10 percent of the world's population. Industrialized countries should take the lead in contributing to a better balance in the focus of the global research effort.

In this connection, to increase the focus on the knowledge needs of developing countries in the research effort in developed countries is important, but it is only one of several measures. It is also vital to promote international exchange of knowledge and to contribute to capacity building in education, research and technology in developing countries. There is today a broad consensus on the importance of these sectors for growth and welfare. It is positive that there is growing awareness internationally of the need to enhance the role of higher education, science and technology within aid and development policies. This is also an aim in Norwegian policy, and our government is presently working on new initiatives. We believe that in our efforts to reach the UN Millennium Goals, capacity building should be given a high priority.

In this context, UNESCO and international scientific organizations like the International Union for Geological Sciences have central roles to play. This is reflected in the aims of the International Year of Planet Earth.

To promote exchange of knowledge in Earth sciences is a main objective, and to actively involve developing countries is among the criteria for research projects to become eligible for the science programme. The strong focus on outreach underlines the importance of involving society as a whole, not only the scientific community, in scientific issues. By outreach activities we may both increase public understanding of the importance of science, strengthen support for funding to research, and contribute to the dissemination of useful knowledge.

As minister of research and higher education, my job is to promote understanding of the importance of fundamental research as well as of applied research. I have pointed to some examples of the great importance of Earth Sciences to society. However, the core of these sciences as well is of course fundamental research, where the connection to the benefits to society may not necessarily be clear at the outset. The quest for pure knowledge, without commercial or other obvious “useful” applications, is most often what results in the most exciting new discoveries and insights.

At a later stage, these may provide the basis for new technologies and sustainable solutions, but we can’t know this beforehand. When it comes to research, we cannot afford to be short-sighted. We must develop and maintain excellent research communities to secure both the continued competence our societies will need, and the discoveries of the future.

This brings me back to the issue of recruitment to studies and research in Earth sciences. In Norway, as in many Western countries, we have for some years experienced both decreasing interest in and knowledge of the natural sciences. Our government has a strategy plan to reverse this trend, and fortunately, we are now seeing some positive developments. Still, there is a way to go, and in this light the International Year of Planet Earth is very welcome.

In conclusion, I wish to congratulate the initiators of the International Year of Planet Earth, UNESCO and the International Union of Geological Sciences, as well as all the people who will participate in the Year. I am looking forward to an exciting time both for the Earth Sciences and for society!

Thank you for your attention.