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Inauguration of the Singapore-ETH Centre for Global Environmental sustainability (SEC) - Shaping tomorrow's urbanization

Singapore, 16.3.2012 - Speech by Federal Councillor Alain Berset - Check against delivery

His Excellency Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources

Ms. Ying-I Yong, Permanent Secretary National Research and Development

Dr. Francis Yeoh, CEO of the National Research Foundation of Singapore

Dr. Fritz Schiesser, Chairman of the ETH Council

Prof Dr. Ralf Eichler, President of the ETH-Zurich

Ambassador Jörg Reding

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today at the opening of the Singapore-ETH Centre for Global Environmental Sustainability.

- The set up of this centre marks a breakthrough for the ETH Zurich and is testimony to its global standing. And it clearly demonstrates that the globalisation of education, research and innovation is one of the fundamental developments of the present day.
- It also marks an important chapter in relations between Singapore and Switzerland. Our states have long fostered close ties, both economic and scientific. The strong commitment on the part of the government of Singapore has made the city state a vital global hub for research and development. A hub which last year was ranked second in the Global Competitiveness Report – just behind Switzerland. I mention that with a certain amount of pride, but also in the awareness that it will require a great effort on our part if we are to retain a leading place in the future.

The fact that our two states occupy these outstanding positions is no coincidence.

- Singapore and Switzerland have much in common: Both are small states with a large number of researchers, although it is particularly striking that Singapore has doubled the number of researchers since the turn of the century – an achievement that one can only congratulate, and one that shows very impressively the energy and dynamism that is characteristic of Asia as a whole.
- Both countries have few natural resources and therefore invest heavily in education, research and innovation. The division of labour between the private and public sectors in terms of investment is also similar, although in Switzerland, the private sector is responsible for a much larger share of R&D expenditure.
- In both countries values such as stability and long term thinking are extremely important. These values act as a counterbalance to the hectic nature of everyday life in a globalised world – These values act as a counterbalance to the economic insecurities and environmental challenges that we are facing today – and for that reason alone they are valuable for the future.
- And lastly, both Singapore and Switzerland are multicultural countries which understand how to harness openness and integration. These are ideal conditions in the age of internationalisation. Both our countries know that international and trans-disciplinary cooperation is essential and that it also presents an opportunity. Today 70 percent of all scientific collaboration in Switzerland is international collaboration. This openness to the world is one of the main reasons why Switzerland has established itself as the most innovative country in Europe. And it is also the engine behind Singapore's incredible dynamism.

Ladies and gentlemen

Relations between Singapore and Switzerland in the field of science are manifold and intensive.

Singapore is an important partner for Switzerland: The Singapore-ETH-Centre is evidence of this, as is the St. Gallen Institute for Management in Asia and the large commitment on the part of the universities of applied sciences.

Cooperation between Singapore and Switzerland is also developing under the auspices of the European Union's Framework Programme. Research grants were awarded to no fewer than 5 projects under FP7.

Switzerland considers itself to be extremely fortunate in view of the dynamic development of our relations. As of today the Singapore-ETH Centre for Global Environmental Sustainability is a further, and not to mention very prominent, channel between Switzerland and Singapore.

For a long time Switzerland primarily invested in its neighbouring countries – for clear geopolitical reasons: Around 90% of R&D investment was conducted in European countries.

The opening of this Singapore Center of the ETH Zurich is a big step outside of Europe. A step towards new synergies and mutual inspiration.

This geographical but also intellectual shift shows that Switzerland with its strong universities must place its scientific resources there where they are needed most: in addressing pressing global challenges.

Soon –in around 20 years or so– more than half of the world's population will live in cities. This presents us with huge problems. For these cities of the future, we will have to find a balance between quality of life and environmental sustainability.

In closing, let me wish all those involved in setting up this important pillar of the ETH – and of Switzerland – in Singapore every success!

On behalf of the Swiss government I would like to thank all those involved on the part of the Singapore government for their invaluable contribution to this pioneering project.

And I very much hope that the future research carried out here at the Singapore-ETH Centre will lead to practical solutions which will help us to shape the process of rapid urbanisation as sustainably as possible.

The urbanisation of the future should be one with a human face.

Thank you for your attention.