



## ADVANCE UNEDITED COPY

### Economic Commission for Europe

#### Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE Region

##### Fifth session

Geneva, 17-18 March 2021

## Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE region on its fifth session

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## I. Attendance

1. The fifth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region was held as a hybrid meeting at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on 17 and 18 March 2021. The session was co-chaired by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal, Mr. Francisco André, and the State Counsellor to the Prime Minister of Romania, Mr. László Borbély.
2. The session was attended by representatives of the following 52 ECE member States: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan.
3. The following non-member States of ECE attended: Costa Rica, Ghana, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Peru, South Africa and Togo.
4. The European Union was represented by the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva. The European Commission, the European Investment Bank, the European Training Foundation, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and URBACT also participated.
5. Representatives of the following United Nations bodies, departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations, conventions and initiatives attended the meeting: Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, International Telecommunication Union, International Trade Centre, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Regional Commissions New York Office, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, United Nations Development Coordination Office, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Headquarters, United Nations Global Compact, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, United Nations Office at Geneva, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, United Nations System Staff College, United Nations World Tourism Organization, World Health Organization, World Meteorological Organization and World Trade Organization. Resident coordinators and representatives from resident coordinators' offices from 8 programme countries in the region also attended.
6. Representatives of the following intergovernmental and other international organizations and networks participated in the session: Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, Central European Initiative, Commonwealth, Council of Europe, Council of Europe Development Bank, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe, Eurasian Development Bank, Eurasian Economic Commission, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, European Space Agency, Geneva International

Centre for Humanitarian Demining, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS, Nordic Council of Ministers, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Regional Cooperation Council, South Centre.

7. Representatives of about 200 non-governmental organizations as well as representatives of academia, the private sector, national human rights institutions and other organizations also participated. A complete list of participants can be found on the website of the regional forum (<https://regionalforum.unece.org>).

## II. Opening and adoption of the agenda

8. The regional forum adopted the provisional agenda for the session, contained in [ECE/RFS/2021/1](#).

9. In his opening remarks, the Co-Chair, Secretary of State André, emphasized that the past year has been clouded by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has slowed down, halted or reversed progress towards sustainable development. The current challenge is to find ways to tackle the severe health and socio-economic crisis without compromising on the transformative approach enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. In Portugal, COVID-19 has also been a disrupter of healthcare and other social and economic systems, impacting most, if not all, of the SDGs. However, the crisis caused by the pandemic should not be an excuse to interrupt policies, but rather an opportunity to reaffirm commitments, including towards the SDGs. Holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, Portugal also intends to raise the EU's level of ambition regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and prioritize digitalization and the sustainable management of natural resources.

10. In his opening remarks, the Co-Chair, State Counsellor Borbély, stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a very persistent and difficult challenge. Countries in the region and worldwide have been confronted with devastating consequences in many areas. Peoples' health and lives were directly affected. Vulnerable groups were put at even greater risk of marginalization. Jobs, transboundary value chains and economic sectors such as tourism have been suffering. Social protection, health and food systems have been put under heavy strain. The key question is how to bounce back from this crisis while fully respecting environmental and climate change considerations. Also, in Romania, the pandemic brought up challenges, and the country is seizing opportunities for sustainability through its National Recovery and Resilience Plan that embeds the SDGs. At the international level, the pandemic calls for strengthening multilateral cooperation and partnerships within the ECE region.

11. The President of the Economic and Social Council underscored in his video message that the common goal in the ECE region, as in other regions, is the recovery from the health, economic, and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the continuing endeavour to achieve the SDGs and climate goals. Addressing cross-cutting issues with regard to gender equality and leaving no one behind must be a crucial element of COVID-19 recovery programmes. He stressed that inequity of access to COVID-19 vaccines could erode the international cooperation that is essential to recover from the crisis and realize the SDGs. To recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to ensure the availability of adequate finance, including debt relief and additional liquidity for developing countries; significant investments in sustainable infrastructure; and the full utilization of science, technology, and innovation.

12. In her video message, the Deputy Secretary-General highlighted that the devastating COVID-19 pandemic could be turned into a watershed moment to recover better. Many governments, particularly in the ECE region, have responded to the economic fallout with exceptionally large stimulus packages. The same ambition and scale is required to achieve the SDGs and address the climate crisis. In Europe and

Central Asia, this means in particular prioritizing specific investments to support the poorer regions that have been most impacted by the crisis; paying special attention to youth, women and disadvantaged groups in strengthening social safety measures; and adding key structural reforms to reduce carbon emissions and improve productivity through digitalization. It is crucial to leverage the opportunities that the landmark summits and conferences on food systems, energy, biodiversity, climate and sustainable transport offer in the months ahead. The UN Development System, after its reform, is now better positioned to provide joined-up policy and operational support to a sustainable recovery and acceleration of SDG progress. The inaugural meeting of the new Regional Collaborative Platform in the previous week concluded with clear priorities for action in 2021. It is essential to achieve ambition, urgency and scale in the joint work with all relevant partners in the region.

13. The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe underscored the importance of steering the powerful forces of change that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed in the right direction, with policies and actions that accelerate progress towards sustainable development. This year's regional SDG progress report explicitly considers the question if the region is on track to meet the SDGs by 2030. On the basis of past trends, the region would achieve only 23 targets by 2030. Progress in 57 targets would need to accelerate. For nine targets, trends need to be reversed. For 80 targets, almost half of the total, there is no sufficient national data to track change over time. Therefore, much progress is necessary not only to meet the targets but also to improve data availability. Much needs to be done in critical areas related to climate change and the environment, in which ECE is particularly active. The thematic focus of the 69th session of the Commission will be the promotion of a circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in the region.

### **III. High-level policy segment: “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and action and delivery on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the ECE Region”**

14. The high-level policy segment heard a keynote address by Mr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, which was followed by a high-level plenary debate.

15. The following government delegations intervened in the plenary debate: Serbia, Turkmenistan, Albania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Spain, Belarus, Switzerland, Russian Federation, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation also intervened.

16. The Chair's summary in the annex to the present report presents the main issues raised during the segment. Written statements are available on the website of the regional forum.

### **IV. Key actions and accelerators to tackle the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and to promote a sustainable recovery**

17. At the outset of the plenary session, the key messages from the virtual peer learning sessions were introduced by the Co-Chair. This was followed by a multi-stakeholder panel discussion, a plenary debate and an interaction with the Deputy Secretary-General.

18. The multi-stakeholder panel was composed of the following speakers:

- Ms. Odeta Barbullushi, Adviser to the Prime Minister of Albania, National Coordinator for Regional Cooperation of Albania

- Mr. Thomas Wagner, Deputy Head of Delegation, EU Delegation to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva

- Mr. Mark Wheatley, European Union of the Deaf (Civil Society Representative)<sup>1</sup>
- Mr. Christoph Steck, Director of Public Policy and Internet, Telefónica S.A. (Spain)

19. During the plenary debate, introduced by the Co-chair through a statement on behalf of Romania, the following government delegations intervened: Malta and Poland. The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, the European Youth Forum, the Chairperson of the ECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry, and the European Academies' Science Advisory Council (EASAC) also intervened.

20. The interaction with the Deputy Secretary-General featured an intervention by the Deputy Secretary-General, Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, and interventions by the Vice-Chairs of the UN Regional Collaborative Platform for Europe and Central Asia, the ECE Executive Secretary, Ms. Olga Algayerova, and the Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS, Ms. Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, followed by interventions from the floor by Armenia, Montenegro and the Republic of Moldova.

21. A summary of the discussions in this segment and the peer learning sessions is contained in the annex.

## **Introduction of the outcomes of the virtual Peer Learning Segment:<sup>2</sup>**

### **(a) Round tables – First set: People**

#### **Strengthening health, food and social protection systems towards COVID-19 recovery and resilience**

*Session 1-1: The impact of COVID-19 on sustainable development: strengthening health system and social protection*

Moderators: Ms. Bettina Menne, Coordinator Health and Sustainable Development, WHO Regional Office for Europe, and Mr. Gerd Trogemann, Manager, Istanbul Regional Hub, UNDP in Europe and Central Asia.

Policy actions presented by: Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, UNDP, UNICEF, WHO.

*Session 1-2: Accelerating SDG progress in the time of a pandemic: improving food systems to make healthy diets accessible to all*

Moderators: Ms. Mary Kenny, Food Safety and Consumer Protection Officer, FAO, and Ms Liliana Annovazzi-Jakab, Head, Agricultural Quality Standards Unit, ECE.

Policy actions presented by: Armenia, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom.

*Session 1-3: Road safety – Changing gear*

Moderator: Ms. Claire Depré, Deputy-Director for Land Transport, DG MOVE, European Commission.

Policy actions presented by: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Georgia, Lithuania, Serbia, ECE, UN Road Safety Fund, WHO.

<sup>1</sup> Representatives of civil society were invited to speak throughout the sessions of the Regional Forum. Details of the preparatory civil society forum can be found at <https://unece-rcem.eu>.

<sup>2</sup> Further information on the 12 virtual peer learning sessions, including lead organizers, speakers, outlines and recordings, are available at: [https://regionalforum.unece.org/round\\_tables.html](https://regionalforum.unece.org/round_tables.html)

**(b) Round tables – Second set: Prosperity****Building back innovative, inclusive and sustainable economies and providing decent and productive jobs for all**

*Session 2-1: Recovering from COVID-19: a sustainable and human-centred approach to the future of work*

Moderator: Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk, Director, ECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division.

Policy actions presented by: Georgia, North Macedonia, Portugal, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Federation of Trade Unions Uzbekistan.

*Session 2-2: Young people and COVID-19: Impact and Solutions*

Moderators: Mr. Gabriel Brezoiu, Group of European Youth for Change (GEYC) General Manager, and Ms. Gabriela Doni, Y-Peer Focal Point.

Policy actions presented by: Moldova, Sweden, Turkey, UNICEF.

*Session 2-3: Transforming Tourism for a sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive post COVID-19 world*

Moderators: Ms. Alessandra Priante, Director, Regional Department for Europe, UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and Ms. Marika Palosaari, Programme Coordinator, Europe Office, UNEP.

Policy actions presented by: Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Germany, Kazakhstan, Portugal, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, Black Sea Women's Club, International Centre for Responsible Tourism.

**(c) Round tables – Third set: Planet****Pathways to a sustainable COVID-19 recovery for climate and the environment**

*Session 3-1: Partnerships for a sustainable recovery: Initiatives to accelerate the achievement of the environment and climate goals of the 2030 Agenda*

Moderators: Ms. Ana Luiza Massot Thompson-Flores, Director, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe; Mr. Marco Keiner, Director, ECE Environment Division; and Mr. Bruno Pozzi, Director, Europe Office, UNEP.

Policy actions presented by: Albania, Germany, North Macedonia, Uzbekistan, European Commission, EBRD, Iberdrola, Little Earth, Tbilisi City.

*Session 3-2: Making sustainable production and consumption work for the circular economy of tomorrow*

Moderators: Mr. Charles Arden-Clarke, Head, One Planet Network (10YFP) secretariat, and Mr. Marco Keiner, Director, ECE Environment Division.

Policy actions presented by: Belarus, France, Kazakhstan, Business Development Group Romania, European Commission, University of Belgrade, UzTextileProm, WBCSD, World Economic Forum.

*Session 3-3: Building back better through Climate-Resilient Recovery*

Moderator: Mr. Vlatko Jovanovski, Head of Secretariat, Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe.

Policy actions presented by: Armenia, Germany, Serbia, United Kingdom, UN Resident Coordinator Tajikistan, WMO Regional Association VI (Europe).

*Session 3-4: Snapshot on Boreal forests' contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals*

Moderator: Ms. Maureen Whelan, Manager, International Affairs, Natural Resources Canada.

Policy actions presented by: Russian Federation, Sweden, Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

**(d) Round tables – Cross-cutting issues***Session 4-1: SDGs and COVID-19 – how can data and statistics help building back better?*

Moderators: Ms. Cara Williams, Assistant Director, International Cooperation and Methodology Innovation Centre, Statistics Canada, and Ms. Joanne Evans, Head of Measures of Well-being and Sustainable Development, Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom.

Policy actions presented by: Albania, Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom, CSR Consulting in Poland, European Commission – Joint Research Centre, GEYC Community Romania, European Network of National Human Rights Institutions-Scottish Human Rights Commission.

*Session 4-2: Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development Goals in the Wake of COVID-19*

Moderators: Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, and Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk, Director, ECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division.

Policy actions presented by: Albania, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Basel Convention, Business and Technology University Georgia, CITES, Element/UNIDO, NARIC Research Institute of Agricultural Economics, OSCE, UN/CEFACT, WMO.

**V. Experiences from the region with Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)**

22. The plenary session included opening remarks by the co-chair, Mr. Francisco André, Mr. Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General, Mr. Alexander Marschik (by video), Permanent Representative of Austria to the UN in New York and co-facilitator for the intergovernmental negotiations for the review process of the ECOSOC and HLPF, and Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid (by video), Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children.

23. The opening remarks were followed by a multi-stakeholder panel discussion composed of the following speakers:

- Mr. Vladislav Smrž, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of the Environment, Czech Republic

- Ms. Mia Crawford, Coordinator 2030 Agenda, Deputy Director Global Agenda, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sweden

- Mr. Anton Tsvetov, Deputy Director, Department of Multilateral Economic Cooperation and Special Projects, Ministry of Economic Development, Russian Federation

- Mr. Peter Erik Danielsson, Mayor of Helsingborg, Sweden, reporting back from the pre-meeting “Local Governments: The role of SDG Voluntary Local Reviews”

- Ms. Nelya Rakhimova, Open School of Sustainable Development, Openshkola (Civil Society representative)

24. The following government delegations took the floor in the ensuing plenary debate: Albania, Bulgaria, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austria, Switzerland. The Chamber of Regions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe also intervened.

25. A summary of the discussions in this segment is contained in the annex.

## VI. Closing

26. The UNOG Director-General underscored that the planet is facing a tsunami of suffering triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, progress towards financing and implementing the SDGs appears at best mixed. On the positive side, numerous VNRs from the region have revealed progress in specific areas. The Regional Forum is a key platform for multi-stakeholder discussions on sustainable development and on new and innovative solutions. International Geneva, as the operational centre of SDG implementation, provides a unique ecosystem of institutions that can make a critical contribution to the collective work on regional and global priorities.

27. In her closing remarks, the ECE Executive Secretary stressed that the regional forum is an expression of the close cooperation among the entities of the regional UN system. It was possible to offer interpretation and sign language interpretation throughout the regional forum, which was critical to increase its reach and accessibility.

28. Before closing the meeting, the Co-Chairs informed participants that the draft report of the regional forum, including the Co-Chairs' summary of discussions, would be circulated for comments by participants. The final version would constitute the official input from the Economic Commission for Europe region to the high-level political forum under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (to be held from 6 to 15 July 2021).



## Annex

### Co-Chairs' summary of the discussions

#### **High-level policy segment: Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and action and delivery on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the ECE region**

1. The keynote speaker drew attention to the fact that the pandemic has magnified health, social, and economic vulnerabilities. It has delayed the achievement of health-related targets, including because of the disruption created on non-COVID-19 related issues. A crisis of non-communicable diseases, including cancer, is looming. Gaps in immunization coverage are creating new outbreak risks. Mental health has dramatically worsened.
2. Universal health coverage is the cornerstone of economic development, women's participation and equal access to affordable healthcare. Equity and solidarity are essential in the response to this crisis and, critically, vaccine access should be increased. The lessons of the recent past should inspire further innovation, scientific breakthroughs, digitalization and, last but not least, solidarity.
3. Member States had to address the emergency health situation while attending the large socioeconomic implications of the pandemic. Measures to support the economy have primarily focused on protecting jobs and, most often, paid particular attention to the plight of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). At the same time, they have aimed to put these interventions in the context of long-term plans to advance other priorities such as digitalization, energy efficiency, addressing climate change, increasing circularity or revamping infrastructure.
4. Member States have embedded SDGs in their policy programmes, developed institutional structures for coordination, including SDG national coordinators, and reached out to stakeholders to advance implementation. There is a general agreement on the use of the 2030 Agenda as guidance framework when developing plans to overcome the current crisis that can balance economic transformation with respect for the environment and greater inclusion, so no one is left behind.
5. Effective and timely implementation of SDGs requires high quality data and statistics, so continued efforts in this direction are required. In drafting SDG-aligned recovery plans, the engagement of all groups, including youth, is of great importance. Beyond national concerns, it is important to remember the need for international solidarity.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, due to their role as care providers and job specialization, including on their labour market participation and career progress. Domestic violence has often increased in the conditions created by the pandemic. There has been a general recognition of these adverse developments, often prompting a renewed commitment to advance women's empowerment and in some cases the implementation of specific plans to address gender violence.
7. Private investment will need to play a critical role in advancing sustainable development. It is therefore critical that suitable structures are put in place, including with the use of international standards, to promote sustainable financing.
8. Despite the dramatic consequences of this crisis, it has been acknowledged that, in some areas, like digitalization, the pandemic has triggered rapid progress. These advances should be used to accelerate the necessary transformation. Regional integration and cooperation initiatives have also proved valuable instruments to address the consequences of the crisis.

## **Key actions and accelerators to tackle the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and to promote a sustainable recovery**

9. The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted economic performance and our societies. It has affected progress in meeting SDGs in all countries, although at a different scale. Existing fragilities have been amplified and the most vulnerable have suffered the most. Policy reaction has been strong across the region, addressing immediate problems but also seeking to shape the recovery in a way that provides new impetus to sustainable development.

10. Addressing the climate change emergency continues to require strong and determined policy action across many areas. A shift towards more resource efficient and circular economies can be a driver for increased prosperity, but this transformation needs to be a just transition where no one is left behind.

11. Innovation and digitalization are powerful transformational drivers. However, it is critical that sufficient attention is given to education, so all can share the rewards and have fair access and equal opportunities. Disadvantaged groups and the needs of SMEs should be taken into account. Increased collaboration between science and the business sector is critical to foster innovation. Skills upgrading, including among public servants, remains a focus of policy attention.

12. Improved governance and rule of law are important elements to make policies more effective and fairer. The participation of civil society, the business community, human rights organizations, and national human rights institutions is critical to define and implement an agenda for change. European NHRIs have documented the way the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing human rights gaps and inequalities in the region. More efforts should thus be made to ensure that NHRIs are more systematically involved in response and recovery plans.

13. Civil society representatives drew attention to the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities and marginalized populations. This underlines the critical role of civil society's full and meaningful engagement to ensure that the recovery is inclusive and leaves no one behind. There is a need for quality public services, with strengthened and extended universal access. In particular, vaccines are a public good and must be made available to all in all countries without discrimination. Workers' rights should be enjoyed by all workers, independently of their employment status, age, gender, disabilities, location, or ethnicity. Long overdue are the ratification of relevant ILO conventions. Data should be disaggregated, including by disability, so the needs of all vulnerable groups can be identified and addressed. Environmental regulations should be strengthened to reverse current unsustainable patterns on consumption and production.

14. The business sector is increasingly incorporating sustainability goals in their priorities. However, stronger incentives to reward this behavior are needed. Global indicators that facilitate comparability would allow to better identify good performers. New financial instruments linked to sustainability, like green bonds, contribute to create these incentives. Strengthening regional cooperation and improving connectivity are sources of economic dynamism and increased resilience that facilitate investment.

15. The reform of the UN Development System has strengthened the ability to support member States in these difficult times. At the regional level, the newly established Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP) is generating synergies and fostering collaboration between over 30 UN entities in the region. Through issue-based coalitions, UN country teams have been provided with policy options and services in different areas, including social protection and environment.

## **Introduction of the outcomes of the virtual Peer Learning Segment:**

### **Session 1-1: The impact of COVID-19 on sustainable development: strengthening health system and social protection**

16. The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, fuelled by high rates of transmission. Hospitalizations continue to put a strain on health systems in the region. Resurgence in all countries is a possibility, related also to the high circulation of the virus variant. While vaccines are bringing hope, they are not a silver bullet. As vaccines are rolled out, transmission must be kept low, through all possible public health measures.

17. COVID-19 magnified the vulnerabilities of those already left behind, while widely disrupting access to social and health services. It disproportionately affected older persons, persons with disabilities, youth, women, migrants and refugees and people living with chronic communicable or non-communicable diseases. Workers in the informal economy and unpaid workers have been particularly hit. The pandemic has brought long-term mental health consequences, the impacts of which are still unfolding.

18. Health and social protection are a human right. Further advances in SDG implementation require strengthening international, national and regional investment in and governance of health and social protection coverage. There is a need to invest into development planning and preparedness. Breaking down the silos between health and social care will contribute to rebuild trust in health services. The ability to identify and track vulnerabilities through disaggregated data is key.

19. Care work is essential for inclusive and healthy societies, but capacity is insufficient and should be increased. Local delivery is critical in health and social services provision and should be enhanced. Increasing spending on care infrastructure and tax relief for employer and families to meet care needs should be supported by appropriate sustainable budgetary allocations. Innovation and technological breakthroughs on social and health issues should be encouraged, including through support to start-ups.

20. Multi-stakeholder engagement is required to meet information needs. In particular, it is important to include the most disadvantaged groups, the “invisible population”, into communication, monitoring and reporting initiatives.

21. An inter-generational approach should be used in the provision of support to facilitate digital access by the aging population. The participation of civil society and youth should be promoted in all initiatives to ensure that no one is left behind.

### **Session 1-2: Accelerating SDG progress in the time of a pandemic: improving food systems to make healthy diets accessible to all**

22. Food systems are critical for advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They should produce sustainably and deliver the quality diets required for men’s, women’s and children’s health, thus relieving pressure on the planet’s natural resources while allowing inclusive economic growth for all.

23. Unhealthy diets are a major contributory factor to the rising prevalence of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The food and agriculture sector’s performance needs to focus on improving access to affordable, safe and nutritious food and minimizing environmental costs, including the prevention of food loss and waste. This has become even more crucial in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as people with pre-existing medical conditions can be more vulnerable to become severely ill.

24. The COVID-19 pandemic has also further exacerbated inequalities in people’s access to safe and nutritious food. Gender, age and geographic location need to be considered, when addressing inequality and ensuring that no one is left behind. Keeping healthy diets affordable and ensuring access to nutritious and safe food to people in vulnerable situations is key during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

25. Food systems should equitably deliver affordable nutritious foods to all. Consumers must be informed, empowered and incentivised to consume healthy diets. The private sector should be engaged in this process. All this requires the adoption of a food systems approach in promoting healthy diets through a combination of concrete policy measures and actions, involving a diverse range of stakeholders, while minimizing environmental costs and impacts and ensuring that all social groups benefit.

26. Initiatives leading to improved food systems include food/drink reformulation programmes; sugar levies; targeted nutrition education and food campaigns to inform consumers; calories and nutritional content on food labels and menus; advertising restrictions; and food systems-based school feeding programmes.

27. Building sustainable and resilient food systems requires the promotion of viable solutions through a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach, involving data and information exchange. Initiatives contributing to this aim include the establishment of agro-meteorological centres to improve collection of climate data and impact assessments of COVID-19 on nutrition and food security to inform policies and actions.

28. Applying a food systems lens to address the challenges related to the provision of healthy diets is key, as they cannot be tackled through isolated interventions. Policies and interventions to ensure healthy diets for all must be formulated and implemented looking at the three dimensions of sustainability, ensuring multi-disciplinary discussions across governmental institutions as well as with non-state actors (CSOs, academia, private sector, youth).

### **Session 1-3: Road safety – Changing gear**

29. Road accidents remain a major health concern, which has also significant economic consequences. Every year, there are around 1.35 million fatalities worldwide, while 20-50 million people are seriously injured. The SDG target 3.6 calling for a 50 percent reduction of fatalities and serious injuries by 2020 has not been met. Despite a positive trend emerging in the ECE region in recent years, continued efforts are required to improve road safety and achieve this target, which has been reset to 2030.

30. Policy experiences show that a systemic approach is best to improve road safety, as assessed by the number of road fatalities/injuries, in a sustainable way. Following such approach implies paying attention to the different components of the system and its interactions in order to reinforce overall safety performance. “Cherry-picking” or targeting only some elements for intervention may appear beneficial in the short term. However, it does not result in sustained improvements in road safety performance.

31. A holistic approach should be applied across four pillars: road use, road infrastructure, vehicles and post-crash response. It should incorporate interventions regarding legislation, enforcement, education and technological support. Overall governance of the system should be provided by road safety management applied at national level. These considerations are in line with ECE Inland Transport Committee Recommendations and are supported by UN legal instruments. Funding provided by the UN Road Safety Fund, which is hosted by ECE, can support countries in addressing weaknesses in road safety systems.

32. New challenges to road safety are emerging from shifting mobility patterns in urban settlements, which include greater emphasis on public transport, cycling, micro-transport (scooters and others) and walking. The market share of motor vehicles with non-conventional propulsion systems is increasing while the role of information and communication technologies in the transport sector is expanding. These developments will require raising the capacities of road safety professionals to tackle potential negative implications of this shifting landscape.

33. Road safety interventions should be based on sound analysis. Modelling can help to identify the safety impacts of shifting trends in road transport to pre-emptively react to future developments. Policy design should be science-based and fully reflect existing trends to anticipate and provide appropriate responses. Information should be widely shared among road safety stakeholders to secure their engagement and to have access to all the relevant data

and analysis. Capacity-building initiatives are necessary to upgrade skills and address other obstacles in improving road safety.

### **Session 2-1: Recovering from COVID-19: a sustainable and human-centred approach to the future of work**

34. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, working-hour losses due to workplace closures have led to higher levels of unemployment and inactivity. The decline in employment is greater for women than for men in most countries. These trends translate into substantial falls in labour income and increased poverty. Income support measures for vulnerable and hard-hit groups should be a policy priority.

35. To advance towards the achievement of SDG 8, policy measures must be innovative, sustainable, inclusive and human-centred. Policy makers must cater to the need for structural change, innovation and inclusive growth; in a way which respects workers' rights and ensures decent work for all.

36. Analytical work is particularly important as a lever for generating national policy dialogue and action. The timely availability of data and evidence-based analysis is key to finding sustainable solutions. They must grant everyone access to adequate social protection, strengthening delivery systems and mobilising resources. Solutions should also significantly boost public and private investment in the human capital of women and men in a coordinated effort and using a human-centred approach. Investment in employment-intensive sustainable infrastructure and enterprises, including digital infrastructure and green technology, should be increased. The centrality of consensus building and social dialogue, involving governments, business groups, and workers' organisations, in identifying and delivering these solutions has been highlighted across the region.

37. Achieving sustainable growth, full employment and decent work for all after the pandemic also calls for policies affecting the direction of innovation, the resilience of trade and the quality of infrastructure. The pandemic and the restrictions imposed to fight it have spawned innovations not only in the medical field, but also in e-commerce and digital technologies facilitating remote working. Still, many businesses have scaled back investments in innovation due to the economic crisis; trade and value chains have been disrupted - highlighting the need to make our economies more resilient - and the digital divide has exacerbated inequalities within and between countries.

38. To "recover better together" from the pandemic, governments should strengthen policies that promote industry-science linkages and cross-border cooperation in innovation, particularly in fields critical for sustainable development. To catalyse private sector investment, Governments should improve the eco-systems for innovative enterprises, where new decent jobs are created. This includes opportunities to build more resilient physical infrastructure through "People-First" public-private partnerships, which put sustainable development at the core of infrastructure investments. To rebuild trade and to make value chains more resilient, particularly in the transition economies in the ECE region, will require cross-border cooperation in facilitating trade, including a shift to more "paperless" trade through inter-operable electronic business process standards.

### **Session 2-2: Young people and COVID-19: Impact and Solutions**

39. The global COVID-19 crisis led to major disruptions for adolescents and young people. Globally, 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries found themselves out of school from one day to the next. In Europe and Central Asia, close to 60 per cent of young people reported that they learned less during the COVID-19 crisis.

40. Young people were also impacted in terms of job losses, leading to increasing unemployment, with one in six stopping work or experiencing reductions in workhours and lower incomes. Many lacked the full extent of digital skills needed to benefit from opportunities emerging online. Young people involved in the gig-economy should have decent jobs and be protected from exploitation.

41. The pandemic has had important impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of youth as they felt isolated and disconnected from peers, experienced increased tensions at home and faced anxiety, stress, fears and depression. Some countries reported dramatic increases in depression, suicide attempts and suicides among adolescents.

42. Inequities and exclusion were experienced by the most vulnerable and marginalized youth, especially those from disadvantaged or poor households, minorities, migrants, and persons living with disabilities or people with chronic health conditions. Many of them faced connectivity issues and limited access to technological devices, thus restricting their opportunities for online study, work and access to services and support. The push towards digital solutions is opening new opportunities which are unfortunately exacerbating many inequities, including along gender lines.

43. Policy examples showed that COVID-19 is creating the impetus to make innovative and drastic improvements in digital education and learning for the 21st century. However, there is an urgent need to provide direct, innovative psycho-social support for young people. Key lessons learned include the importance of young people as key partners in responding to the pandemic and of their engagement in prevention, combating misinformation and reducing the impact of disruptions. There are multiple examples of youth engagement in supporting cross-generational solidarity and mitigating the impacts of the pandemic.

44. Young people expressed their readiness to contribute towards building back better. Their active participation in policy development, creation and delivery of programmes and services help shape better responses. Participation is an important step in rehabilitation and recovery and can help regain young people's sense of purpose.

45. Young people called for effective and sustainable mechanisms for their engagement and participation. They demanded the establishment of more permanent and inclusive platforms for dialogue and engagement online and offline, at all levels, to allow their voices to be heard and their actions to be supported, so they can influence decisions on all matters that affect them. The situation and concerns of adolescents and youth should be central to recovery plans, with special attention to reducing learning-losses, building skills for successful transitions to decent jobs; and ensuring that youth mental health and wellbeing are addressed. Young people are ready to support initiatives to increase equity, inclusion, solidarity and green transitions.

### **Session 2-3: Transforming tourism for a sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive post COVID-19 world**

46. Responsible recovery of the tourism sector is key to the region's economy and job creation – particularly for women and youth. In responding to the pandemic, the economic crisis and environmental breakdown, governments have a unique chance to direct tourism towards sustainable paths that prioritize prosperity, planetary health and inclusive societies. As reported by some countries of the region, the current economic crisis related to the pandemic is seen and taken as an opportunity for sustainability.

47. Addressing the negative social and environmental impacts and economic risks of tourism is critical to achieve SDGs targets and to address the needs of the local population, visitors, the industry, and vulnerable groups as well as to build resilience to future environmental and health crises. There is a growing trend among consumers to seek authentic and “life-fulfilling” travel experiences that closely align to their own personal values, including concerns about their travel's impacts on local communities, climate change, wildlife and environmental conservation.

48. Several countries in the region are implementing sustainable tourism projects to accelerate the transition to sustainable consumption and production patterns, including the use of renewable energy sources, development of green infrastructure and other measures that support climate action and environmental sustainability. Popular destinations that have suffered from over-tourism are seeking business value from solutions that help to preserve natural and cultural assets and allow tourism to thrive in the long run.

49. Governments need to further develop, scale up and share measurable commitments towards innovative and experience-based tourism building on sustainable consumption and production, green energy and transport as well as protection of natural and cultural resources.

Stakeholder cooperation and knowledge platforms are useful in sharing good examples of sustainability criteria, guidance and practices for sustainable tourism services, including on improved well-being of concerned local communities.

50. The transformation of tourism means also a shift of focus in data collection, measuring and reporting. Whereas in the past the success of tourism has been measured mainly by physical indicators such as arrivals and overnight stays, the development of tourism-related sustainability indicators is based on a holistic view. This view allows for a comprehensive picture considering the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects, including also a consideration of public perception of tourism among the resident population.

51. A sustainable transformation must be a systemic effort reflected at all levels: international, national and local. Alignment of policies and investment, public-private partnerships and cooperation across the tourism value chains are key to sustainable recovery. Therefore, improving the dialogue and strengthening cooperation among businesses, local authorities, civil society and vulnerable groups is essential. Governments need to facilitate, measure and report policies and actions, which need to be coherent and consistent across the tourism value chain and related sectors. Civil Society noted the role of the United Nations to provide policy guidelines for a transition to more sustainable tourism.

52. Increasing sustainable finance and investment is needed to boost innovation, strengthen skills and support new initiatives across the tourism value chain. Investment support in training programmes and other business development is a necessary condition to the sustainable transformation of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.

### **Session 3-1: Partnerships for a sustainable recovery: Initiatives to accelerate the achievement of the environment and climate goals of the 2030 Agenda**

53. The pandemic response has shown that societies can react fast and effectively in times of crisis to achieve a shared goal. Such a whole-of-society inter-generational approach is needed to address the climate change and biodiversity crises. This approach must be enabled through education, incentives, regulation and strengthened institutional capacities to build and sustain partnerships systematically to build a greener and resilient recovery and to fulfil the 2030 Agenda.

54. Strengthening women's entrepreneurship and employment are key to a just and fair transition towards an inclusive economy and effective climate action. Women must have access to affordable finance and need greater financial independence, especially in rural areas. Women should also have better representation in higher-level decision-making. Women's engagement must be built into the structure of green finance and crisis recovery packages. The capacities of authorities and the private sector should be developed to implement legislation that guarantees gender equality and equity for use and access to resources for women.

55. Public participation in governance and decision-making and the involvement of civil society are needed to accomplish an ambitious green transition and to ensure the sustainability, coherence, effectiveness and fairness of plans that respect our planet, human rights and needs of the marginalized and women. It is also essential that governments engage the public meaningfully in decision-making on pandemic recovery and financing plans, in accordance with their legal obligations. At the city level, the leading role of a citizen participation coordination group for stakeholder consultations on green areas illustrated the importance of ensuring broad citizen participation in a green recovery. Legislation and regulation can enable this process.

56. The public and private sectors need to work together to smooth the transition towards a sustainable energy economy, including through local engagement. Stable energy policy, the promotion of research and development for sustainable technology, the removal of harmful subsidies, legislation that promotes green investment and streamlined administrative procedures were among the approaches highlighted.

57. Local communities could play an important role in bringing change at the local level, especially on climate change and nature-based solutions. Youth-led organizations play a key role in this area.

58. Green financing improves regional resilience by focusing on sectors that have the greatest potential for transformation. The European Green Deal acts as a roadmap for a green and inclusive recovery in the European Union, addressing climate change and biodiversity loss and building on numerous partnerships to leverage yet more green finance.

59. Effective science-policy partnerships and quality and timely data, sourced through international cooperation, can ensure that the impact of climate variability and climate change is adequately considered in development planning in support of the SDGs.

### **Session 3-2: Making sustainable production and consumption work for the circular economy of tomorrow**

60. Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and circular economy are key drivers for accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and towards achieving net-zero emissions. A multi-stakeholder approach is needed to address the challenges entailed by unsustainable practices for decades. Circular economy is an innovation and competitiveness agenda which must be accompanied by structural reforms, so that the costs of linear business models are no longer borne by the society. Policy makers must develop an enabling policy and regulation landscape to move from a system depleting finite resources to a model that creates value by retaining rather than wasting.

61. This roundtable emphasized the essential role of policy coherence and transversal implementation. The core enablers of a successful green transition to build back better are commitment, partnership and leadership supported by implementation roadmaps with clear accountability, targets and traceable actions to transform the economy at scale through stakeholders' engagement. The collaboration of relevant ministries is critical for a successful implementation of national strategies.

62. Several countries shared best practices of a smart policy mix for the green transition and sustainable lifestyles for priority value chains and target sectors such as textiles, agri-food, water, batteries, electronics, construction, transport and plastics. Harnessing regulations, standards, and incentives for sustainable production are requirements to drive consumers' behavioural change when voluntary instruments hit the glass ceiling. Civil Society noted that it is necessary to make sustainable consumption affordable and equitable for all.

63. Sustainable waste management is another policy response to be embedded in national and regional recovery plans, along with the implementation of resource-efficiency management, green public procurement, eco-design, recycling, repairability and remanufacturing practices to drive emissions and costs reduction, competitiveness and circular business models. In order to anchor SCP in daily consumers' lifestyles, gendered patterns must be strongly considered and tackled.

64. At the same time, making responsible choices easier for both businesses and consumers is an essential precondition. Traceability and transparency of value chains and reliable sustainability claims can guide consumers in their choices and shape more sustainable and ethical markets. Digital and innovative solutions have an instrumental role to support transparency and traceability, which eventually will lead to supply chains' enhanced resilience and sustainability. Digital traceability can be a real game changer to turn challenges into opportunities and to increase impact at a quick pace, identifying the incentives and bottlenecks to be addressed by the relevant actors as part of an ecosystem.

65. At the same time, the application of advanced technologies must go hand in hand with multi-stakeholder collaboration, capacity building, and support for digital access. Inclusive partnerships at both public and private level will ensure that the digital divide and skills gap can be rapidly tackled to benefit the majority, as demonstrated by country experiences on digital and circular water waste use innovation and on smart agriculture to enhance the productivity, competitiveness and sustainability of cotton production.



### **Session 3-3: Building back better through climate-resilient recovery**

66. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries in the region and worldwide have been undergoing a major disaster experience. In addition, adverse impacts from weather- and climate-related disasters and risks related to the climate emergency have been on the rise. With multiple hazards and systemic risks converging under these circumstances, a crucial lesson is the need to integrate climate change and pandemic-related risks into recovery policies as well as into all-hazard approaches for disaster risk reduction. Synergies between disaster risk reduction and climate change strategies need to be coordinated to leverage joint impact, while being cognizant of the different paces and stages of implementation. Systemic risks can be successfully integrated into all-hazard approaches to deliver a green and resilient recovery.

67. Moreover, climate-resilient and disaster risk reduction strategies need to be mainstreamed across all sectors, as shown by climate smart development strategies. It was noted that this integrated approach provides opportunities to bring various sectors together for a green and resilient recovery.

68. Concerted efforts and partnerships are required among all key stakeholders driving the resilience agenda. The presence of a national platform on disaster risk reduction is also crucial to coordinate all segments of society and government units with regard to emergency situations. National coordination efforts to respond to COVID-19 and improve the resilience of national health and national disaster management authorities have been successfully deployed. It is important to note the interrelation between resilience and sustainability, i.e. working towards a resilient future also contributes to a more sustainable future and vice versa.

69. The knowledge and understanding of systemic and complex risks should be strengthened, supported by data and science. In addition, the capacity of disaster risk reduction systems should be enhanced, and their stress testing will be critical. The local level is critical both for building resilience and recovering from the pandemic. Experience shows that municipalities that had a good civil protection system in place were coping better with the COVID-19 crisis. In the longer term, promoting small-scale local initiatives such as energy cooperatives could help accelerate the green transition.

70. Building resilience as well as the necessary trust is a long- term process that involves effective collaboration also between the national meteorological and hydrological services and disaster risk management agencies, providing for a comprehensive people-centred early warning system. Governments should establish multi-hazard early warning systems, putting observation systems and datasets in place for accurate monitoring and weather forecasting to enhance resilience. These should be integrated into the WMO Global Multi-Hazard Alert System and serve Disaster Risk Management authorities, the UN, and the broader population. These efforts can be complemented by the further development of national disaster loss databases, which requires broad participation of various national and international stakeholders.

71. Regional and subregional collaboration is essential to assess the impacts of crises on societies, economies and vulnerable groups, to respond to intersecting health, socio-economic and climate crises, to embark on a resilient COVID-19 recovery, and to strengthen preparedness for future emergencies.

### **Session 3-4: Snapshot on boreal forests' contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals**

72. Despite covering 27 percent of the global forest area and more than 60 percent of the forest area in the ECE region, boreal forests might be the most overlooked terrestrial biome. Boreal forests stabilise the global climate, provide important resources for the timber industry, shelter biodiversity and ensure food security for many rural and indigenous people. They are thus essential for achieving the SDGs.

73. Climate change poses a severe threat to these vulnerable ecosystems, including through devastating fires, pest and insect outbreaks, and extreme weather events. This roundtable featured experts from both policy and science who outlined some of the greatest

challenges for the sustainable management of boreal forests and introduced some existing and potential policy tools.

74. The participants agreed that boreal forests are largely neglected in global policy discussions and stressed that there is an urgent need to promote cooperation and exchange of knowledge between countries in the boreal zone. The newly established ECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Boreal Forests is one mechanism for facilitating this cooperation, and panellists stressed its importance for cross-country collaboration and knowledge exchange.

75. Experts underlined that the boreal forests' potential to contribute to the SDGs and mitigate climate change is contingent upon reducing their vulnerability and increasing their resilience to the changing climate. As one expert pointed out, "there is no mitigation without adaptation". Past management practices like establishing homogenous stands and planting trees in wrong sites as well as knowledge gaps have led to enhance the vulnerability of boreal forests.

76. Country tailored strategies that consider issues such as enhancing disturbance regimes and tackling ongoing biodiversity loss through adaptive management are needed. The strategies need to be forward-looking, and decision-making needs to include indigenous and rural communities that depend on boreal forests for their livelihood, as well as youth, who will manage and benefit from those forests in the future. The implementation of cross-sectoral policy instruments was also underlined as an important mechanism to ensure that boreal forests contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

77. By way of concluding, the panellists highlighted that the issues boreal forests face are not limited to countries in the boreal biome but will have an impact globally and called for immediate action to restore these precious ecosystems and ensure their contribution to the SDGs.

#### **Session 4-1: SDGs and COVID-19 – how can data and statistics help building back better?**

78. The COVID-19 pandemic demanded an effective and targeted response for which data and statistics became even more vital than before. The crisis strained countries' response mechanisms. It was treated as a challenge by most national statistical systems and became an accelerator of innovation throughout the region. It boosted projects that had already been started in the areas of digitalization, data collection and sharing, communication, and facilitated access to new and non-traditional data sources.

79. In these difficult conditions, national statistical offices and systems faced double pressure: to deliver new data, in a quicker, more frequent and more granular manner, with their staff telecommuting, and no possibilities to collect data through traditional means, such as face-to-face surveys.

80. The "leave no one behind" principle became an important focus to identify the especially vulnerable population groups and target policy interventions. It provided an opportunity to establish new partnerships and look for new data sources, tools and innovative solutions. This aspect was highlighted by all speakers: government representatives, academia, NHRIs, NGOs, and the business sector.

81. Several examples of adjusting, adapting and combining the existing and new data sources, and implementing new techniques and tools were discussed, including by combining data from different registers; accessing mobile phone operators' data for mobility statistics; web scraping for price statistics and modelling and flash estimations for education, health and GDP data. The scope of surveys was expanded to areas previously considered outside the coverage of official statistics (e.g., the prevalence of the virus based on medical tests). The gender analysis of the impact of the pandemic on women and men shows that understanding a socio-economic impact is the first step in addressing this impact.

82. The representatives of civil society, academia, NHRIs and business sector emphasised the importance of embedding the "leave no one behind" principle in existing policies and acknowledging the value added of complementary sources to official statistics, such as citizen generated data, sentiment indicators based on social media or results of a human rights monitoring. Additionally, it was underlined that a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to data can provide a real understanding of lived experience of those left behind and promote

human rights and equality as the central focus of all recovery policies. In this regard, NHRIs and other actors can provide disaggregated data to statistical offices and governments.

83. The round table concluded that the national statistical offices, members of national statistical systems, and all other data producers have to join efforts and seek modern and agile solutions. Cooperation and partnership are key if we are to “leave no one behind” - this should be a pathway for a transformative future, not just for crisis situations.

#### **Session 4-2: Digital transformation for Sustainable Development Goals in the wake of COVID-19**

84. ICTs and digital infrastructure have become central to maintaining economic and societal activity, thus lessening the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact. Developing digital skills and building human capacities to empower citizens is essential. Policies and programs need to foster the neutral acquisition of digital skills and inclusive access to digital services (such as gender-sensitive educational programs and/or access by persons with disabilities). National strategies and coordination mechanisms for strengthening online safety for children and youth should be established through a multi-stakeholder approach.

85. Broadband development is the backbone for global supply chain integration, for the innovative use of health information, citizens’ opportunities to improve their options in the workforce, and for the ability of young people to gain skillsets, amongst others. Access to the next generation of infrastructure (fixed, mobile, wireless, satellite) at an affordable price is a key prerequisite for advancing sustainable development.

86. Digital services are key drivers of economic growth, as well as structural and sectoral resilience. In agriculture, country-specific bottlenecks should be eliminated to foster digital innovation. Public and private investments must target both the supply and demand side to close the rural digital divide and increase technology adoption rates. Youth rural-urban migration, an ageing farming population and the low propensity to invest in digital agricultural solutions are problems that could be tackled by showcasing evidence of the returns of technology investments, promoting public-private partnerships and adopting user-friendly software interfaces for farmers.

87. Integrated inter-sectoral frameworks are needed to stimulate the collection, sharing and interoperability of ICT-related data. This is particularly important for national mobile health solutions, such as digital health identity, which strengthened national capacities in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. The establishment of a Digital Common Information Platform for a Multi-Hazard Early Warning Advisory System, enabling to process warnings on weather, water and climate data in a harmonized manner, requires suitable legal frameworks and capacity development.

88. ICTs can make value chains more transparent, traceable, and, ultimately, more inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Standards, as developed by international organizations through an inclusive multi-stakeholder approach, promote interoperable data exchange, thus increasing the speed and reducing the costs of international transactions.

89. Standards and digitalization can also make international trade greener and safer. Governments are implementing electronic risk-based control systems to combat illegal trade in wildlife (in support of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, CITES), and electronic message exchanges, so that transboundary movements of waste and its disposal can be tracked and traced (in support of the Basel Convention). Cross-border digital trade facilitation measures help minimize human contact, thus enhancing safety. Furthermore, enhanced connectivity between countries, can have a positive impact on good neighborly relations, helping not only to build trust, dialogue and co-operation but also contributing to social stability, job creation and economic participation. Fully harnessing the benefit of standardization and digitalization in trade facilitation can be enabled by using platforms as consensus builders to adopt new technologies, while addressing competition-related challenges. Country-specific tech-related vulnerabilities should be avoided as part of broader efforts to reduce the digital divide. An inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach is needed to find common ground in a mutually beneficial manner.

## Experiences from the region with Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

90. Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are making an important contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Ongoing VNRs are addressing how progress in advancing SDGs has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They are also using the 2030 Agenda as the framework to recover better and making societies more equal and sustainable.

91. The preparation of VNRs facilitates the identification of priority policy areas as well as establishing strategic and collaborative partnerships. Good quality data and a robust indicator framework, at different levels, remain critical to develop effective monitoring and evaluation tools and accountable processes to track SDG implementation.

92. Given the broad scope of the 2030 Agenda, policy coherence is paramount. VNRs serve to put in place institutional and analytical mechanisms that facilitate this coherence across different areas, reaching synergies and addressing trade-offs between different targets. There is a need to collect information that allows the assessment of interactions between individual targets. This is the basis to identify transformative pathways to guide further efforts and improve policy coherence.

93. VNRs give countries the opportunity to share their individual experiences, including not only successes but also challenges and gaps as well as areas where more action and partnerships are needed. In particular, VNRs offer important learning venues, both at the national level, including through the conduct of survey dialogues, and internationally, through the peer exchange of policy experiences. The Regional Forum has also contributed to this peer learning, which is an important factor in effective SDG implementation.

94. VNRs serve as a tool to coordinate action among different stakeholders, both in and outside of government, and forge strong partnerships. Involvement of the business sector will be critical for success in SDG implementation. Some VNRs are documenting the contribution of the business sector and the partnerships struck with governments to drive progress.

95. The broad involvement of multiple stakeholders facilitates collecting evidence and offers more detailed insights on implementation. A whole of government approach should be complemented by a whole of society approach. The emphasis should be more on VNRs as a continuous process of engagement, rather than on the production of a final report, which is the culminating stage of this process. Countries are exploring various mechanisms to reach out to different stakeholders, which has proved more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic, including through the use of digital platforms.

96. Parliaments, thorough their legislative capacity and by holding governments accountable, can make significant contributions to SDG implementation. According to the IPU's latest report on "Parliamentary involvement in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews", despite some progress, however, the involvement of parliaments on VNRs is still limited. There is a need to increase parliaments' role but also to strengthen awareness about the important ways in which parliaments can ensure progress in meeting the goals.

97. As VNRs facilitate mobilizing and engaging all key stakeholders, children should be recognized as agents of change. The pandemic has magnified existing problems, exacerbating inequalities and placing children at greater risk of experiencing violence. Child protection and justice systems should be recognized as essential services along with health, mental health and education.

98. The involvement of subnational levels of government is important, not only for the preparation of the VNRs but also for effective implementation of the SDGs. The localization of the SDGs contributes to inclusiveness and the strengthening of multi-stakeholder engagement. Local players should be empowered to assume ownership of the agenda 2030 and its implementation.

99. Voluntary local reviews gained significant momentum in 2020, reflecting the importance of initiatives to accelerate SDG implementation by increased action at the local level. Engagement of subnational governments in the preparation of VNRs would serve to increase policy coherence and facilitate cooperation between various domestic actors. Lessons from the implementation of SDGs at local and regional levels should be reflected in VNRs. Using international agreed metrics to anchor the VLRs provides an opportunity for inclusive cooperation.

100. Civil society representatives emphasized the need for an inclusive process for VNR preparation, with clear timelines and open and transparent ways to publish outcomes of this process, as it is done in several countries. Shadow reports and other materials prepared by civil society should be integrated in VNRs. Some countries include civil society representatives in their delegations. This is a good practice that should be extended. But civil society engagement should be an ongoing process, not limited to the preparation of VNR presentations.

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