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## Economic Commission for Europe

### Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe Region

#### Fifth session

Geneva, 17 and 18 March 2021

## Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe 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, Francisco André, and the State Counsellor to the Prime Minister of Romania, 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 the European Union's Urban Development Network Programme also participated.
5. Representatives of the following United Nations bodies, departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations, conventions and initiatives attended the meeting: secretariat of the 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 (UNICEF), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, Development Coordination Office, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Economic and Social Council, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 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, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Sustainable Development Solutions Network, United Nations System Staff College, World Tourism Organization, World Health Organization (WHO), World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and World Trade Organization. Resident coordinators and representatives of resident coordinator offices from eight 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 Programme, 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 Commonwealth of Independent States, Nordic Council of Ministers, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Regional Cooperation Council and 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 document [ECE/RFS/2021/1](#).

9. In his opening remarks, the Co-Chair (Portugal) emphasized that the past year had been clouded by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis. The pandemic has slowed, halted or reversed progress towards sustainable development. The current challenge is to find ways to tackle the severe health and socioeconomic crisis without compromising on the transformative approach enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In Portugal, COVID-19 has disrupted health care and other social and economic systems, affecting progress towards most, if not all, of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the crisis caused by the pandemic should not be an excuse to interrupt the implementation of policies, but rather an opportunity to reaffirm commitments, including towards the Goals. During its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Portugal would set more ambitious objectives for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by the Union and prioritize digitalization and the sustainable management of natural resources.

10. In his opening remarks, the other Co-Chair (Romania) stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic had proved to be an intractable challenge. The pandemic has had numerous devastating consequences for countries in the region and worldwide. It has also directly affected peoples' health and lives. Vulnerable groups have become at an even greater risk of marginalization than before the pandemic. Jobs, transboundary value chains and economic sectors such as tourism have been suffering. Social protection, health and food systems have been under heavy strain. The key question is how the region will bounce back from the crisis, while taking environmental and climate change considerations fully into account. The pandemic has also brought challenges to the surface in Romania. The country is seizing opportunities to achieve sustainability through its national recovery and resilience plan, which incorporates the Sustainable Development Goals. At the international level, recovery from the pandemic requires the strengthening of multilateral cooperation and partnerships within the Economic Commission for Europe Region.

11. The President of the Economic and Social Council underscored in his video message that the common goals in the ECE Region, as in other regions, were to recover from the health, economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and to continue to work towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and climate goals. Programmes in aid of recovery from the COVID-19 crisis must address cross-cutting issues relating to gender equality and ensure that no one was left behind. He stressed that inequities in gaining access to COVID-19 vaccines could erode international cooperation, which was essential to recovery from the crisis and making progress towards the Goals. To recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential for developing countries to have access to adequate financial resources, including debt relief and

additional liquidity; for significant investment to be made in sustainable infrastructure development; and for science, technology and innovation to be used to the fullest.

12. In her video message, the Deputy Secretary-General said that the devastating COVID-19 pandemic could be turned into a watershed moment to recover better. Many governments, in particular in the ECE Region, have responded to the economic fallout with exceptionally large stimulus packages. The same ambition and scale are required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and address the climate crisis. In Europe and Central Asia, targeted investment needs to be prioritized to support poorer regions that have been most affected by the crisis; special attention needs to be paid to strengthening social safety measures to protect young people, women and disadvantaged groups; and key structural reforms need to be put in place to reduce carbon emissions and improve productivity through digitalization. It is crucial to take advantage of the opportunities that will present themselves at the landmark summits and conferences on food systems, energy, biodiversity, climate and sustainable transport in the near future. The reform of the United Nations development system has better positioned it to provide joined-up policy and operational support to a sustainable recovery and accelerated progress towards the Goals. The inaugural meeting of the new regional collaborative platform, in March 2021, concluded with clear priorities for action in 2021. It is essential for the Regional Forum and other partners in the region to work towards these priorities with ambition and urgency and at scale.

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 had unleashed in the right direction, by adopting policies and taking action that accelerated progress towards sustainable development. In its 2021 assessment, ECE examined whether the region was on track to meet the Goals by 2030. If past trends continued, the region would achieve only 23 targets by 2030; progress towards 57 targets would need to accelerate; trends would need to be reversed for 9 targets; and more data was needed at the national level to track change over time for 80 targets, almost half of the total number of targets. Therefore, significant progress is necessary not only to meet the targets but also to improve the availability of data. 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 sixty-ninth session of the Commission would 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 pandemic and action and delivery on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Economic Commission for Europe Region”**

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

15. Delegations representing the governments of the following countries took part in the plenary debate: Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Netherlands, Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkmenistan and the United Kingdom. A representative of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation also spoke.

16. The Chair’s summary contained in the annex to the present report sets out the main issues raised during the segment. Written statements are available on the website of the Regional Forum.

## IV. Plenary session: Key measures and accelerators to tackle the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and to promote a sustainable recovery

17. At the beginning of the plenary session, the Co-Chair introduced the key messages from the peer learning round tables, held virtually from 10 to 16 March 2021. His introduction 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:

- Adviser to the Prime Minister of Albania, National Coordinator for Regional Cooperation of Albania, Odeta Barbullushi
- Deputy Head of Delegation, European Union delegation to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva, Thomas Wagner
- Executive Director, European Union of the Deaf,<sup>1</sup> Mark Wheatley (civil society representative)
- Director of Public Policy and Internet, Telefónica S.A. (Spain), Christoph Steck

19. During the plenary debate, which the Co-Chair opened by reading a statement on behalf of Romania, delegations representing the governments of the following countries spoke: Malta and Poland. Representatives of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions and the European Youth Forum, the Chairperson of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry of ECE, and a representative of the European Academies' Science Advisory Council also spoke.

20. The interaction with the Deputy Secretary-General featured a statement by the Deputy Secretary-General, Amina J. Mohammed, and statements by the Vice-Chairs of the regional collaborative platform for Europe and Central Asia, the Executive Secretary of ECE, Olga Algayerova, and the Director of the Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, UNDP, Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, followed by statements from the floor by Armenia, Montenegro and the Republic of Moldova.

21. A summary of the discussions in this session and the virtual peer learning round tables is contained in the annex to the present report.

### Virtual peer learning round tables:<sup>2</sup>

#### Cluster 1: People

#### **Strengthening health, food and social protection systems towards pandemic recovery and resilience**

*Session 1-1: The impact of the pandemic on sustainable development: strengthening health systems and social protection*

Moderators: Coordinator, Health and Sustainable Development, Regional Office for Europe, WHO, Bettina Menne, and Manager, Istanbul Regional Hub for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, UNDP, Gerd Trogemann.

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

<sup>1</sup> Representatives of civil society were invited to speak at all sessions of the Regional Forum.

Information about the preparatory civil society forum can be found at <https://unece-rcem.eu>.

<sup>2</sup> Information about the 12 virtual peer learning round tables, including lead organizers, speakers, outlines and recordings, is available at: [https://regionalforum.unece.org/round\\_tables.html](https://regionalforum.unece.org/round_tables.html).

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

Moderators: Food Safety and Consumer Protection Officer, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Mary Kenny, and Head, Agricultural Quality Standards Unit, ECE, Liliana Annovazzi-Jakab.

Policy measures presented by: Armenia, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

*Session 1-3: Road safety – changing gears*

Moderator: Deputy-Director for Land Transport, Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), European Commission, Claire Depré.

Policy measures presented by: Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Georgia, Lithuania, Serbia, ECE, United Nations Road Safety Fund and WHO.

## **Cluster 2: Prosperity**

### **Building back innovative, inclusive and sustainable economies and providing decent and productive jobs for all**

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

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

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

*Session 2-2: Young people and the pandemic: impact and solutions*

Moderators: General Manager, Group of European Youth for Change, Gabriel Brezoiu, and Focal Point in Charge, Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER) Moldova, Gabriela Doni.

Policy measures presented by: Republic of Moldova, Sweden, Turkey and UNICEF.

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

Moderators: Director, Regional Department for Europe, World Tourism Organization, Alessandra Priante, and Programme Coordinator, Europe Office, United Nations Environment Programme, Marika Palosaari.

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

## **Cluster 3: Planet**

### **Pathways to a sustainable pandemic 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: Director, Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, UNESCO, Ana Luiza Massot Thompson-Flores; Director, Environment Division, ECE, Marco Keiner; and Director, Europe Office, United Nations Environment Programme, Bruno Pozzi.

Policy measures presented by: Albania, Germany, North Macedonia, Uzbekistan, European Commission, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Iberdrola, The Little Earth (Tajikistan) and the City of Tbilisi.

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

Moderators: Head, Secretariat, One Planet network (10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns), United Nations Environment

Programme, Charles Arden-Clarke, and Director, Environment Division, ECE, Marco Keiner.

Policy measures presented by: Belarus, France, Kazakhstan, European Commission, Business Development Group (Romania), University of Belgrade, Uztexileprom, World Business Council for Sustainable Development and World Economic Forum.

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

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

Policy measures presented by: Armenia, Germany, Serbia, United Kingdom, Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Tajikistan and WMO Regional Association VI (Europe).

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

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

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

#### **4. Cross-cutting sessions**

*Session 4-1: Sustainable Development Goals and the pandemic: how can data and statistics help build back better?*

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

Policy measures presented by: Albania, Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom, Joint Research Centre (European Commission), CSR Consulting (Poland), Group of the European Youth for Change (GEYC) Community (Romania), Scottish Human Rights Commission (also on behalf of European Network of National Human Rights Institutions).

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

Moderators: Head, Regional Office for Europe, International Telecommunication Union, Jaroslaw Ponder, and Director, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, ECE, Elisabeth Tuerk.

Policy measures presented by: Albania, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, secretariat of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, Business and Technology University (Georgia), secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, Element (Russian Federation) and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (jointly), NARIC Research Institute of Agricultural Economics, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business and WMO.

## **V. Experiences from the region with voluntary national reviews**

22. The plenary session included opening remarks by the Co-Chair, Mr. André, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Liu Zhenmin, the Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Martin Chungong, the Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations and co-facilitator of the intergovernmental negotiations related to the Economic and Social Council and high-level political forum review processes, Alexander Marschik (by video), and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Najat Maalla M'jid (by video).

23. The opening remarks were followed by a multi-stakeholder panel discussion in which the following speakers took part:

- Deputy Minister of the Environment, Czechia, Vladislav Smrž
- Coordinator for the 2030 Agenda, Deputy Director, Global Agenda Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden, Mia Crawford
- Deputy Director, Department of Multilateral Economic Cooperation and Special Projects, Ministry of Economic Development, Russian Federation, Anton Tsvetov
- Mayor of Helsingborg, Sweden, Peter Erik Danielsson, reporting back from the pre-meeting on local governments and the role of voluntary local reviews of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals
- Civil society representative from Openshkola, Open School of Sustainable Development, Nelya Rakhimova

24. The following government delegations took the floor in the ensuing plenary debate: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Spain and 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 Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva underscored that the planet was facing a tsunami of suffering triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, progress towards financing and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals appears mixed at best. On the positive side, numerous voluntary national reviews 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. The international community in Geneva, often referred to as International Geneva, as the operational centre for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, represents 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 Executive Secretary of ECE stressed that the Regional Forum is an expression of the close cooperation among the entities of the regional United Nations system. It had been possible to offer interpretation, including sign language interpretation, throughout the course of the Regional Forum, which was critical for increasing the reach and accessibility of the Forum.

28. Before closing the meeting, the Co-Chairs informed participants that the draft report of the Regional Forum, including the Co-Chairs' summary of the 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 pandemic and action and delivery on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Economic Commission for Europe region**

1. The keynote speaker drew attention to the fact that the pandemic had magnified health, social and economic vulnerabilities. It has delayed the achievement of health-related targets, including by disrupting progress 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 and mental health has dramatically worsened.
2. Universal health coverage is the cornerstone of economic development, women's participation and equal access to affordable health care. Equity and solidarity are essential in responding to the pandemic, and it is critical that vaccine access be increased. The lessons of the recent past should inspire further innovation, scientific breakthroughs, digitalization and, last but not least, solidarity.
3. During the discussion, Member States stressed that they had to address the emergency health situation while tackling the significant socioeconomic implications of the pandemic. Measures to support the economy have been primarily focused on protecting jobs and, most often, on the plight of small and medium-sized enterprises. At the same time, efforts have been made to incorporate these interventions into long-term plans to advance other priorities such as promoting digitalization, increasing energy efficiency, addressing climate change, increasing circularity or revamping infrastructure.
4. Member States have incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals into their policy programmes, developed institutional structures for coordination, including national coordinators and related national coordination mechanisms for the Goals, and have reached out to stakeholders to advance implementation. There is a general agreement that the 2030 Agenda should be used as a guidance framework for the development of plans to overcome the crisis that strike a balance between economic transformation and respect for the environment and greater inclusion, in order to ensure that no one is left behind.
5. Effective and timely implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals requires high-quality data and statistics. Continued efforts in this area are therefore required. During the drafting of recovery plans in alignment with the Goals, the engagement of all groups, including youth, is of great importance. In addition to national concerns, it is important to remember the need for international solidarity.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women owing to their role as care providers and the specific jobs they perform, including on their labour market participation and career advancement. Domestic violence has often increased under the conditions created by the pandemic. There has been a general recognition of these adverse developments that, in many cases, has prompted a renewed commitment to advancing women's empowerment and, in some cases, to implementing specific plans to address gender-based violence.
7. Private investment should play a critical role in advancing sustainable development. It is therefore critical to establish suitable structures to promote sustainable financing, in accordance with international standards.
8. It has been acknowledged that, despite its dramatic consequences, the pandemic has triggered rapid progress in some areas, such as digitalization. These advances should be used to accelerate the necessary transformation. Regional integration and cooperation initiatives have also proven valuable in addressing the consequences of the crisis.

## **Key actions and accelerators to tackle the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and to promote a sustainable recovery**

9. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected economic performance and societies in the region and worldwide. It has delayed progress in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, albeit to differing degrees. Existing fragilities have been amplified and the most vulnerable have suffered the most. Policy responses have been strong throughout the region, addressing immediate problems while also seeking to ensure that recovery efforts provide new impetus for sustainable development.

10. Addressing the emergency of climate change continues to require strong and determined policy action across many areas. A shift towards more resource-efficient and circular economies can be a driver of increased prosperity. However, such a transition must be equitable so that no one is left behind.

11. Innovation and digitalization are powerful transformational drivers. However, it is critical that sufficient attention be given to education so that all can share in, have fair access to and have equal opportunities to benefit from the rewards of these developments. Disadvantaged groups and the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises should be taken into account. Increased collaboration between science and the business sector is critical for fostering innovation. Policy measures should focus on the upgrading of skills, including among public servants.

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

13. Civil society representatives drew attention to the impact of the pandemic on inequalities and marginalized populations, underlining the critical role of civil society and its full and meaningful engagement in ensuring that recovery efforts are inclusive and leave no one behind. There is a need for quality public services, as well as strengthened and extensive, universal access thereto. In particular, vaccines are a public good that must be made available to everyone, everywhere, without discrimination. Workers' rights should be enjoyed by all workers, independently of their employment status, age, gender, disability status, location or ethnicity. The ratification of relevant International Labour Organization conventions is long overdue. Data should be disaggregated, including by disability, so that the needs of all vulnerable groups can be identified and addressed. Environmental regulations should be strengthened in order to reverse the current unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.

14. The business sector is increasingly incorporating sustainability goals into its priorities. However, stronger incentives to reward such measures are needed. Global indicators that facilitate comparability will make it possible to better identify good performers. New financial instruments linked to sustainability, such as green bonds, contribute to creating such incentives. Strengthening regional cooperation and improving connectivity are sources of economic dynamism and increased resilience that facilitate investment.

15. The reform of the United Nations development system has strengthened its ability to support Member States under the present difficult circumstances. At the regional level, the newly established regional collaborative platform is generating synergies and fostering collaboration among over 30 United Nations entities in the region. Through issue-based coalitions, United Nations country teams have been provided with policy options and services in different areas, including social protection and the environment.

## **Outcomes of the virtual peer learning round tables:**

### **Session 1-1: The impact of the pandemic on sustainable development: strengthening health systems and social protection**

16. The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, fuelled by high rates of transmission. Hospitalizations are continuing to put a strain on health systems in the region. Resurgence of the disease is a possibility in all countries owing to widespread variants of the virus. While vaccines are bringing hope, they are not a silver bullet. Even as vaccination campaigns are rolled out, transmission rates must be kept low, using every possible public health measure.

17. The pandemic magnified the vulnerabilities of those already left behind and widely disrupted access to social and health services. It disproportionately affected older persons, persons with disabilities, young people, 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 hard hit. The pandemic also had long-term mental health consequences, the full extent of which was yet to be seen.

18. Health and social protection are a human right. Advances in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals require greater international, national and regional investment in and governance of health and social protection coverage. Investment is also needed in development planning and preparedness. Breaking down the silos between health and social care will contribute to rebuilding trust in health services. It is crucial to be able to identify and track vulnerabilities through disaggregated data.

19. Care work is essential for inclusive and healthy societies, but current capacity is insufficient and should be increased. Local delivery of health and social services is critical and should be enhanced. Higher spending on the care infrastructure and tax relief for employers and families to meet care needs should be supported by commensurate and sustainable budgetary allocations. Innovation and technological breakthroughs on social and health issues should be encouraged, including by providing 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 and “invisible” population groups, in communication campaigns and monitoring and reporting initiatives.

21. An intergenerational approach should be used to support access to digital resources by the ageing population. The participation of civil society and young people should be promoted in all initiatives to ensure that no one is left behind.

### **Session 1-2: Accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the time of the pandemic: improving food systems to make healthy diets accessible to all**

22. Food systems are critical for advancing the 2030 Agenda. They should be sustainable and deliver the quality diets required for human health, thus relieving pressure on the planet’s natural resources, while allowing inclusive economic growth for all.

23. Unhealthy diets are a major contributing factor to the rising prevalence of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases. The food and agriculture sector needs to focus on improving access to affordable, safe and nutritious food and minimizing environmental costs, including by preventing food loss and waste. Such efforts have become even more crucial in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as people with pre-existing medical conditions can be more vulnerable to becoming gravely ill.

24. The pandemic has also exacerbated inequalities in people’s access to safe and nutritious food. Gender, age and geographical location need to be taken into consideration when addressing inequality and ensuring that no one is left behind. Keeping healthy diets affordable and ensuring that people in vulnerable situations have access to nutritious and safe food is essential during the pandemic and beyond.

25. Food systems should deliver affordable nutritious foods equitably to all. Consumers must be informed, empowered and incentivized to consume healthy diets. The private sector should play a role in this process. For the process to succeed, a food systems approach needs to be adopted so as to promote healthy diets by combining targeted 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 that improve food systems include food and drink reformulation programmes; sugar levies; targeted nutrition education and campaigns to inform consumers about food; the inclusion of calories and nutritional content information on food labels and menus; advertising restrictions; and school feeding programmes designed to shape and strengthen local and national food systems.

27. In order to build sustainable and resilient food systems, viable solutions should be promoted using a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach that involves data and information exchange. Such an approach would benefit from the establishment of agrometeorological centres, to improve the collection of climate data, and the use of assessments of the impact of COVID-19 on nutrition and food security to inform policies and actions.

28. A food systems lens is the key to addressing the challenges of providing for healthy diets, which cannot be tackled through isolated interventions. Policies and interventions aimed at ensuring healthy diets for all must be designed and implemented in accordance with the three dimensions of sustainable development and take into account multidisciplinary discussions across governmental institutions and with civil society organizations, academia, the private sector and young people.

### **Session 1-3: Road safety: Changing gears**

29. Road accidents remain a major health concern with significant economic consequences. Every year, road accidents account for around 1.35 million fatalities worldwide. An additional 20 to 50 million people suffer serious injuries. Sustainable Development Goal target 3.6, to halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents by 2020, has not been met. Despite a positive trend emerging in the region in recent years, more needs to be done to improve road safety and achieve the target. The year by which the target should be met has been changed to 2030.

30. Existing policies show that a systemic approach is the best way to improve road safety, as assessed by the number of road fatalities and injuries, in a sustainable way. Such an approach requires paying attention to the different components of the system and its interactions in order to reinforce overall safety. Although it may appear beneficial to cherry-pick or target only some elements for intervention in the short term, this approach does not result in sustained improvements in road safety.

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. The overall governance of the system should include road safety management at the national level. These considerations are in line with the recommendations of the Inland Transport Committee of ECE and are supported by United Nations legal instruments. Funding provided by the United Nations Road Safety Fund, hosted by ECE, can be used to support countries in addressing weaknesses in their road safety systems.

32. New challenges to road safety are emerging as a result of changes to mobility patterns in urban settlements, including a greater emphasis on public transport, cycling, microtransport (scooters and others) and walking. The market share of motor vehicles with non-conventional propulsion systems is increasing, and the role of information and communications technology in the transport sector is expanding. Road safety professionals will need to develop their capacity to respond to the potential negative implications of these developments.

33. Road safety interventions should be based on sound analysis. Modelling can help to identify the impact of shifting trends on road transport safety and enable pre-emptive measures. Policymaking should be science-based and fully reflect existing trends in order to anticipate future trends and provide appropriate responses. Road safety stakeholders should share information widely to ensure buy-in and to give them access to all the relevant data and analysis. Capacity-building initiatives are necessary to upgrade skills and address other obstacles to improving road safety.

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

34. Workplace closures during the pandemic have resulted in reduced working hours, leading to high levels of unemployment and inactivity. The decline in employment is greater for women than for men in most countries. These trends translate into substantial decreases in labour income and increased poverty. Income support measures for vulnerable and hard-hit groups should be a policy priority.

35. In order to make progress towards the achievement of Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), policy measures must be innovative, sustainable, inclusive and human-centred. Policymakers must cater to the need for structural change, innovation and inclusive growth and do so in a way that respects workers' rights and ensures decent work for all.

36. Analytical work is particularly important for generating national policy dialogue and action. The timely availability of data and evidence-based analysis is key to finding sustainable solutions. Such solutions must ensure that everyone has access to adequate social protection and contribute to strengthening delivery systems and mobilizing resources. The solutions should also include a coordinated effort and use a human-centred approach to significantly boost public and private investment in human capital of women and men. There should be greater investment in employment-intensive sustainable infrastructure and enterprises, including digital infrastructure and green technology. The centrality of consensus-building and dialogue, involving governments, business groups and workers' organizations, in identifying and delivering such solutions has been highlighted across the region.

37. In order to achieve sustainable growth, full employment and decent work for all after the pandemic, policies affecting the direction of innovation, the resilience of trade and the quality of infrastructure need to be put in place. The pandemic and the restrictions introduced to combat it have given rise to innovations in the medical field, e-commerce and digital technology, all of which facilitate remote work. Still, many businesses have scaled back investment in innovation owing to the economic crisis; trade and value chains have been disrupted – highlighting the need for economies to be made more resilient – and the digital divide has exacerbated inequalities within and between countries.

38. In order to recover better together from the pandemic, governments should strengthen policies that promote ties between industry-science linkages and cross-border cooperation in innovation, in particular in fields that are critical for sustainable development. In order to catalyse private sector investment, governments should improve ecosystems for innovative enterprises, where new decent jobs are created. Doing so would create opportunities to build more resilient physical infrastructure through public-private partnerships that put people first by placing sustainable development at the core of infrastructure investments. Rebuilding trade and making value chains more resilient, in particular in transition economies in the region, will require cross-border cooperation to facilitate trade, including a shift towards more paperless trade through interoperable electronic business process standards.

### **Session 2-2: Young people and the pandemic: 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 compared with a normal school year.

40. Young people were also affected by job losses, leading to increased unemployment, with 1 in 6 stopping work or experiencing reductions in working hours and lower incomes. Many lacked the full extent of digital skills needed to benefit from emerging online job opportunities. Young people involved in the gig economy should have decent jobs and be protected from exploitation.

41. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of young people, 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 young people, especially those from disadvantaged or poor households, minorities, migrants, and persons living with disabilities or people with chronic health conditions. Many of them had unreliable Internet connections and limited access to technological devices, which restricted their opportunities for online study, work and access to services and support. The push towards digital solutions is opening up new opportunities, and also exacerbating many inequities, including along gender lines.

43. There were examples of policies that showed that COVID-19 has been the impetus for innovative and drastic improvements in digital education and learning for the twenty-first century. However, there is an urgent need to provide direct, innovative psychosocial support for young people. Key lessons learned include the important role young people play as key partners in responding to the pandemic and in preventing and combating misinformation and reducing the impact of disruptions. There are multiple examples of youth engagement in supporting cross-generational solidarity and mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

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

45. Young people called for effective and sustainable mechanisms that would enable 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 young people should be central to recovery plans, and special attention should be paid to reducing learning loss, building skills for successful transitions to decent jobs, and ensuring the mental health and well-being of young people. Young people are ready to support initiatives to increase equity, inclusion, solidarity and the transition to a green economy.

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

46. Responsible recovery of the tourism sector is key to the region's economy and job creation – in particular for women and young people. In their response to the pandemic, the economic crisis and environmental breakdown, governments have a unique opportunity to put tourism on a sustainable path by prioritizing prosperity, planetary health and inclusive societies. Some countries in the region have reported that they see, and are using, the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic as an opportunity to promote sustainability.

47. Addressing the negative social and environmental impacts and economic risks of tourism is critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goals and targets and meeting the needs of the local population, visitors, the tourism industry and vulnerable groups, as well as for building resilience to future environmental and health crises. Consumers are increasingly seeking authentic and life-fulfilling travel experiences that closely align with their own personal values, including concerns about the impact of their travel on local communities, climate change, wildlife and the environment.

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, the development of green infrastructure and other measures that support climate action and environmental sustainability. Popular destinations that have suffered from overtourism are seeking business value from solutions that help to preserve natural and cultural assets and enable 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 that promote sustainable consumption and production, green energy and transport and protect natural and cultural resources. Platforms that enable stakeholder to cooperate and share knowledge are useful for sharing examples of sustainability criteria and guidance and good practices for providing sustainable tourism services and improving the well-being of concerned local communities.

50. The transformation of tourism has also prompted a shift in focus in collection, measuring and reporting of data. Whereas, in the past, the success of tourism has been measured mainly using physical indicators, such as arrivals and overnight stays, with the development of tourism-related sustainability indicators it has become possible to paint a more complete picture that includes economic, sociocultural, environmental aspects and the perception of tourism by the local population.

51. For a transformation to be sustainable, it must be a systemic effort at all levels: international, national and local. A sustainable recovery can only be achieved if policies, investment, public-private partnerships and cooperation are aligned across the tourism value chains. It is therefore essential to improve dialogue and strengthen cooperation among businesses, local authorities, civil society and vulnerable groups. 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. Representatives of civil society noted the role that the United Nations can play in providing policy guidelines for a transition to more sustainable tourism.

52. More sustainable finance and greater investment is needed to boost innovation, strengthen skills and support new initiatives across the tourism value chain. Investment in training programmes and other business development is necessary for 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 quickly and effectively in times of crisis in order to achieve a shared goal. Such a whole-of-society, inter-generational approach is needed to address the climate change and biodiversity crises and must be enabled through education, incentives, regulation and strengthened institutional capacities to build and sustain partnerships systematically, in order to ensure a greener and more resilient recovery and to implement the 2030 Agenda.

54. Strengthening women's entrepreneurship and employment are key to achieving a just and fair transition towards an inclusive economy and effective climate action. Women, in particular in rural areas, must have access to affordable financing and need to have greater financial independence. 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 in order to enable the implementation of legislation guaranteeing women's equal and equitable use of and access to resources.

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 implementation of sustainable, coherent, effective and fair plans that promote respect for the planet, human rights and the needs of marginalized persons 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 spaces illustrated the importance of ensuring broad citizen participation in green recovery efforts. Legislation and regulations can enable this process.

56. The public and private sectors need to work together to ensure a smooth 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 and legislation promoting green investment and streamlined administrative procedures were among the approaches highlighted.

57. Local communities can play an important role in bringing about change at the local level, especially through climate change action and the implementation of nature-based solutions. Youth-led organizations play a key role in this area.

58. Green financing improves regional resilience by focusing on the sectors with the greatest potential for transformation. The European Green Deal serves as a road map for a green and inclusive recovery in the European Union, addressing climate change and biodiversity loss and building on numerous partnerships in order to further leverage 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 Sustainable Development Goals.

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

60. Sustainable consumption and production and the circular economy are key drivers for accelerating action to implement the 2030 Agenda and to achieve net zero emissions. A multi-stakeholder approach is needed to address challenges resulting from decades of unsustainable practices. The circular economy is an innovation and competitiveness agenda that must be accompanied by structural reforms so that society is no longer required to bear the costs associated with economic activity, as is the case under linear business models. Policymakers must develop enabling policies and regulations aimed at moving away from a system based on the depletion of finite resources to a model that creates value through retention rather than waste.

61. Participants in this round table emphasized the essential role of policy coherence and transversal implementation. The core enablers of a successful green transition aimed at building back better are commitment, partnership and leadership, supported by the implementation of road maps with clear accountability, targets and traceable measures designed to transform the economy at scale through stakeholder engagement. The collaboration of relevant ministries is critical for the successful implementation of national strategies.

62. Several countries shared best practices in developing a smart mix of policies aimed at advancing the green transition and sustainable lifestyles, focused on 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 required to drive changes in consumer behaviour when voluntary instruments alone are inadequate. Civil society representatives noted that it was necessary to make sustainable consumption affordable and equitable for all.

63. Sustainable waste management is another policy response that should 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 aimed at driving the reduction of emissions and costs and at fostering competitiveness and circular business models. In order to anchor sustainable consumption and production in daily consumers' lifestyles, gendered patterns must be carefully considered and tackled.

64. At the same time, making responsible choices easier for both businesses and consumers is an essential precondition for progress. Traceable and transparent value chains, as well as reliable sustainability claims, can guide consumers in their choices and can shape more sustainable and ethical markets. Digital and innovative solutions have an instrumental role to play in supporting transparency and traceability, factors that will eventually lead to enhancing the resilience and sustainability of supply chains. Digital traceability can achieve transformative change by helping to turn challenges into opportunities, increase impact quickly and identify incentives and bottlenecks to be addressed by relevant actors within 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 with both the public and private sectors will make it possible to



rapidly address the digital divide and skills gap in order to benefit the majority, as demonstrated by country experiences with digital and circular innovations in water and waste use, and with smart agriculture initiatives designed 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 facing major disaster conditions. In addition, adverse effects resulting from weather- and climate-related disasters, as well as risks related to the climate emergency, have been on the rise. A crucial lesson to be learned from these circumstances, under which there are multiple simultaneous hazards and systemic risks, is the need to integrate climate change and pandemic-related risks into recovery policies and into all-hazard approaches to disaster risk reduction. Synergies between disaster risk reduction and climate change strategies must be harnessed in order to leverage the combined impact of such strategies, taking into account the different paces and stages of implementation thereof. Systemic risks can be successfully integrated into all-hazard approaches in order to achieve a green and resilient recovery.

67. Moreover, climate resilience and disaster risk reduction strategies must be mainstreamed across all sectors, as shown by climate-smart development strategies. It was noted that such an integrated approach provided opportunities to bring together various sectors to ensure a green and resilient recovery.

68. Concerted efforts must be made by, and partnerships must be developed among, all key stakeholders driving the resilience agenda. The presence of a national platform on disaster risk reduction is also crucial for coordinating the efforts of all segments of society and government units to address emergency situations. National coordination efforts to respond to COVID-19 and improve the resilience of national health authorities and national disaster management authorities have been successfully deployed. It is important to note the interrelationship between resilience and sustainability: working towards a resilient future contributes to a more sustainable future, and vice versa.

69. Knowledge and understanding of systemic and complex risks, supported by data and science, should be strengthened. In addition, the capacity of disaster risk reduction systems should be enhanced; the stress-testing of such systems will also be critical. Efforts at the local level are critical both for building resilience and for recovering from the pandemic. Experience shows that municipalities with effective civil protection systems in place have been coping better with the COVID-19 crisis. In the longer term, promoting small-scale local initiatives such as energy cooperatives could help to accelerate the green transition.

70. Building resilience, as well as the necessary trust, is a long-term process involving effective collaboration, including between national meteorological and hydrological services and disaster risk management agencies, aimed at developing comprehensive, people-centred early warning systems. Governments should establish multi-hazard early warning systems and put in place observation systems and data sets to ensure accurate monitoring and weather forecasting in order to enhance resilience. Such early warning systems should be integrated into the Global Multi-hazard Alert System of the World Meteorological Organization and should serve the needs of disaster risk management authorities, the United Nations and the broader population. Such efforts can be complemented by the further development of national disaster loss databases, which requires the broad participation of various national and international stakeholders.

71. Regional and subregional collaboration is essential for assessing the impact of crises on societies, economies and vulnerable groups, responding to intersecting health, socioeconomic and climate crises, embarking on a resilient COVID-19 recovery process, and strengthening preparedness for future emergencies.

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

72. Despite covering 27 per cent of the global forest area and more than 60 per cent of the forest area in the ECE region, boreal forests might be the most overlooked terrestrial biome. Boreal forests stabilize the global climate, provide important resources for the

timber industry, as well as shelter for biodiversity, and ensure food security for many rural and indigenous people. They are thus essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

73. Climate change poses a severe threat to these vulnerable ecosystems, including through devastating fires, pest and insect outbreaks and extreme weather events. The round table featured both policy and scientific experts, 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 the urgent need to promote cooperation and the exchange of knowledge between countries in the boreal zone. The newly established Team of Specialists on Boreal Forests of ECE and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is one mechanism for facilitating such cooperation, and panellists stressed its importance for cross-country collaboration and knowledge exchange.

75. Experts underlined that, in order for boreal forests to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and climate change mitigation, efforts must be made to reduce their vulnerability and increase their resilience to the changing climate. As one expert pointed out, “there is no mitigation without adaptation”. Past management practices such as the establishment of homogeneous stands and the planting of trees in the wrong places, as well as knowledge gaps, have increased the vulnerability of boreal forests.

76. Country-tailored strategies that take into account issues such as enhancing disturbance regimes and tackling ongoing biodiversity loss through adaptive management are needed. Such strategies must be forward-looking, and decision-making must 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 Sustainable Development Goals.

77. In conclusion, the panellists highlighted that the issues confronting boreal forests are not limited to countries in the boreal biome but will have an impact worldwide, and called for immediate action to restore these precious ecosystems and ensure their contribution towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **Session 4-1: Sustainable Development Goals and the pandemic: how can data and statistics help build back better?**

78. The COVID-19 pandemic has demanded an effective and targeted response. Therefore, data and statistics have become more vital than ever before. Countries’ response mechanisms have been strained by the crisis, which has been treated as a challenge by most national statistical systems and has become an accelerator of innovation throughout the region. The pandemic has boosted pre-existing projects in the areas of digitalization, data collection and sharing and communication, and has facilitated access to new and non-traditional data sources.

79. Under these difficult conditions, the pressure faced by national statistical offices and systems has doubled, as they have been required to deliver new data in a quicker, more frequent and more granular manner while their staff have been telecommuting and they have been unable to collect data through traditional means, such as face-to-face surveys.

80. The “leave no one behind” principle has become an important guide for identifying particularly vulnerable population groups and targeting policy interventions. It has provided an opportunity to establish new partnerships and identify new data sources, tools and innovative solutions. This point was highlighted by all speakers: government representatives, academia, national human rights institutions, non-governmental organizations and the business sector.

81. Several examples of adjusting, adapting and combining existing and new data sources, as well as implementing new techniques and tools, were discussed, including combining data from different registers, gaining access to data from mobile phone

operators for mobility statistics, web scraping for price statistics and modelling and flash estimations for data on education, health and gross domestic product. Surveys have been expanded to cover areas previously considered outside the scope of 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 socioeconomic effects is the first step towards addressing them.

82. Representatives of civil society, academia, national human rights institutions and the business sector emphasized the importance of embedding the “leave no one behind” principle in existing policies and of acknowledging the value added of sources complementary to official statistics, such as citizen-generated data, sentiment indicators based on social media or the results of human rights monitoring. In addition, it was underlined that a human rights-based approach to data could provide a real understanding of the lived experience of those left behind, and could help to make human rights and equality the central focus of all recovery policies. In this regard, national human rights institutions and other actors can provide disaggregated data to statistical offices and Governments.

83. Participants in the round table concluded that national statistical offices, members of national statistical systems and all other data producers must join efforts and seek modern and agile solutions. Cooperation and partnership are key to the aim of leaving no one behind and should be a pathway to a transformative future, not just a response to crisis situations.

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

84. Information and communications technologies and digital infrastructure have become central to maintaining economic and social activity and have thus lessened the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing digital skills and building human capacities to empower citizens are essential. Policies and programmes must ensure that all who wish to acquire digital skills can do so without discrimination, and must guarantee inclusive access to digital services, including by promoting gender-sensitive education and accessibility for 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 of global supply chain integration and is essential in promoting the innovative use of health information, enabling citizens to improve their options in the workforce and helping young people to gain skills, among other things. 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 in order to foster digital innovation. Public and private investments must target both the supply and demand side in order to close the rural digital divide and increase technology adoption rates. The rural-urban migration of young persons, the 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 on investment in technology, promoting public-private partnerships and adopting user-friendly software interfaces for use in the agricultural sector.

87. Integrated intersectoral frameworks are needed to stimulate the collection, sharing and interoperability of data related to such technologies. This is particularly important for national mobile health solutions, such as digital health identity capabilities, which have strengthened national capacities to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. The establishment of digital common information platforms for multi-hazard early warning advisory systems, which make it possible to process weather- and water-related warnings and other climate data in a harmonized manner, requires suitable legal frameworks and capacity development.

88. Information and communications technologies can make value chains more transparent, traceable and, ultimately, more inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Standards,

such as those 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 the illegal trade in wildlife, in support of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, as well as electronic message exchange systems so that transboundary movements of waste and its disposal can be tracked and traced, in support of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal. Digital measures aimed at facilitating cross-border trade help to minimize human contact, thus enhancing safety. Furthermore, enhanced connectivity between countries can have a positive impact on good-neighbourly relations, not only helping to build trust, dialogue and cooperation but also contributing to social stability, job creation and economic participation. The full benefits of standardization and digitalization for trade facilitation can be harnessed through the use of platforms for consensus-building, enabling countries to adopt new technologies while addressing competition-related challenges. Country-specific, technology-related vulnerabilities should be avoided as part of broader efforts to reduce the digital divide. An inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach is needed in order to find common ground in a mutually beneficial manner.

#### **Experiences from the region with voluntary national reviews**

90. Voluntary national reviews are making an important contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Ongoing reviews are addressing how progress in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and are using the 2030 Agenda as a framework for helping the world to recover better and making societies more equal and sustainable.

91. The preparation of voluntary national reviews facilitates the identification of priority policy areas, as well as the establishment of strategic and collaborative partnerships. High-quality data and a robust indicator framework, at different levels, remain critical for developing effective monitoring and evaluation tools and accountable processes for tracking the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

92. Given the broad scope of the 2030 Agenda, policy coherence is paramount. Voluntary national reviews serve to put in place institutional and analytical mechanisms that facilitate such coherence across different areas, creating synergies and addressing trade-offs between different targets. There is a need to collect information so that interactions between individual targets can be assessed. On this basis, transformative pathways can be identified to guide further efforts and improve policy coherence.

93. Voluntary national reviews 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, such reviews offer important learning opportunities, both at the national level, including through the conduct of surveys and dialogues, and at the international level, through peer exchanges of policy experiences. The Regional Forum has also contributed to such peer learning, which is an important factor in the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

94. Voluntary national reviews help to coordinate action among a variety of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, and to forge strong partnerships. The involvement of the business sector will be critical for success in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. In some voluntary national reviews, the contribution of the business sector, as well as partnerships established with Governments to drive progress, are being documented.

95. The broad involvement of multiple stakeholders facilitates the collection of evidence and provides more detailed insights with regard to implementation. A whole-of-government approach should be complemented by a whole-of-society approach. Voluntary national reviews should be viewed more as a continuous process of engagement, rather than being focused on the production of a final report, which is the culminating stage of that process. Countries are exploring various mechanisms for

reaching out to different stakeholders, including through the use of digital platforms, although such outreach has proven more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

96. Parliaments, through their legislative capacity and by holding Governments accountable, can make significant contributions to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. According to the report of the Inter-Parliamentary Union on parliamentary involvement in the 2020 voluntary national reviews, although some progress has been made, the involvement of parliaments in such reviews is still limited. There is a need to increase the role of parliaments but also to raise awareness about the important ways in which they can ensure progress in meeting the Goals.

97. As voluntary national reviews facilitate the mobilization and engagement of 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 care, mental health care and education.

98. The involvement of subnational levels of government is important, not only for the preparation of voluntary national reviews but also for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The localization of the Goals contributes to inclusiveness and the strengthening of multi-stakeholder engagement. Local actors should be empowered to assume ownership of the 2030 Agenda and its implementation.

99. Voluntary local reviews gained significant momentum in 2020, reflecting the importance of initiatives to accelerate efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals through increased action at the local level. The engagement of subnational governments in the preparation of such reviews would serve to increase policy coherence and facilitate cooperation among various domestic actors. Lessons from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the local and regional levels should be reflected in the reviews. Using internationally agreed metrics to anchor the reviews provides an opportunity for inclusive cooperation.

100. Civil society representatives emphasized the need for an inclusive preparation process for voluntary national reviews, with clear timelines and open and transparent ways to publish outcomes, as is the case in several countries. Shadow reports and other materials prepared by civil society should be integrated into the reviews. Some countries include civil society representatives in their delegations, a good practice that should be adopted more broadly. Nevertheless, civil society engagement should be an ongoing process and should not be limited to the preparation of voluntary national review presentations.

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