

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region 2022

Opening Statement

by Ms. Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary

6th April 2022

(930 words for around 7 minutes)

Excellencies, Mr. Chairman,

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to warmly welcome all of you to the 2022 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region.

I'm glad that we have been able to resume the practice of physical meetings and very pleased to see old and new friends in the room.

But this is not a happy moment for celebration. A war is raging in Ukraine and its devastating effects are being felt in the region and beyond.

The loss of life, the destruction, the suffering must end. Now.

The healing must start. Now.

The war has radically changed the outlook for sustainable development in the region. Our challenges have become harder. As the wreckage continues, it is difficult to assess all the negative consequences. But there is no doubt that damage will be significant. We need to be ready to give the necessary support to the Ukrainian people and to those who are being most impacted by this war.

But even before the conflict, we could not be satisfied with the pace of implementation of the 2030 Agenda in our region.

Despite advances, insufficient data continues to impair our ability to assess the situation. The latest SDG progress report has been prepared by the UNECE Statistical Division in cooperation with the Regional Coordination Group on Data and Statistics for Europe and Central Asia. It shows that sufficient national data to track change over time are available only for 105 out of 169 SDG targets, up from 89 last year.

Overall, progress remains slow – and we are running out of time.

On the basis of the data available so far, which does not yet cover fully the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region will achieve only 26 SDG targets by 2030, which represents a quarter of all the targets for which there is sufficient evidence. By comparison, last year the number of targets on track was 23.

This limited improvement does not give room for complacency. Acceleration of progress is needed for 64 targets. And for 15 targets, there is a need to reverse existing trends. Last year, backsliding concerned only 9 targets.

In some areas, we are falling further behind.

Extreme poverty is rare in the UNECE region. However, other targets to reduce poverty are not on track to be achieved by 2030. Income inequality is worsening in many countries. The negative impact of COVID-19 on education has been stronger on the poorer, thus adding to the drivers of inequality.

Advances on nutrition and sustainable food supply has been insufficient. The region must reverse trends to maintain a diverse food supply and improve agricultural productivity and efficiency. Current tensions in global food markets stress the relevance of further advances in these areas.

The region has made good progress towards access to basic services such as drinking water and energy. However, the region must speed up progress on sanitation, water quality and water-use efficiency. Those are areas where UNECE has much to offer - and where transboundary cooperation plays a critical role.

The green transition is well under way. In most countries, reliance on renewable energy has increased and energy efficiency have improved. However, acceleration is required to meet 2030 targets. Through its work on energy, transport and housing, ECE is ready to support its member States in delivering the faster progress that is required in these areas.

Unfortunately, we seem unable to kick out our addiction to fossil fuels fast enough. Progress towards reducing fossil fuel subsidies has slowed. Fossil fuel subsidies increased between 2015 and 2019 in more than half of the countries with data. The target has become further beyond reach. The current price environment creates stronger incentives for increased efficiency. We need to protect vulnerable households but also prevent a wasteful use of public resources that delays the necessary transformation.

But, on the positive side, the COVID-19 crisis brought changes in industry and transportation which may help propel the region towards sustainable and clean industrialization, with targets on track to be achieved by 2030.

By contrast, most of the targets on decent work and economic growth are progressing too slowly to be achieved. The legacy of the pandemic and the worsened economic outlook resulting from the ramifications of the war in Ukraine have created new headwinds.

Infrastructure development is critical for the green transition and to create a solid foundation for increased prosperity. To reverse current trends in infrastructure development, we need additional investments, which should be fully aligned with the 2030 Agenda. UNECE normative work contributes to facilitate this alignment, including through the use of our multilateral environmental conventions and our activities on public-private partnerships.

The 2022 SDG progress report shows that international cooperation around science and technology has been making good progress in the region. UNECE, thanks to the support received from multiple donors, is part of these efforts, sharing expertise and developing policy recommendations for impactful innovation policies.

However, the report also shows the negative impacts of the pandemic on public finances and development assistance to developing countries. In those areas, we are seeing a reversal of past progress. The current challenging circumstances will make it even more difficult to reverse these trends.

And finally – but critically.

Gender equality is truly central to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. But progress is well behind of what is required. Just one related target – on the use of technology to promote the empowerment of women- is on track.

The work ahead will be challenging.

But we believe in what we do.

We will change our region for a better world.

I wish you fruitful and interesting discussions.