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“Reaching halfway point for the SDGs: Setting the scene for the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report”

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Excellencies, distinguished participants,

- Thank you very much for inviting me to the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development to share a perspective from science and the preparation of the 2023 GSDR specifically. It is an honour and joy to be here.
- These are difficult times in Europe, and the world. Many are asking themselves: are we even seeing development, let alone sustainable development, with recent events and setbacks that seem to take societies backwards.
- In this talk, I will talk a bit about how the setbacks have affected the SDGs, but also share some of the positive trends we see, try to offer what some would call ‘evidence-based hope’.
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- I will set the scene and look at how the context is different now, compared with four years ago, by focusing on some key trends we are currently looking at in the Independent Group of Scientists, then review social science findings on uptake of SDGs as a policy agenda and finish by noting some possible emerging issues.
- I will then introduce you to the process of preparing next GSDR and our preliminary framework, and how it focuses on acceleration and transformation, concrete tools, and the science-policy-society interface. I will finish with an invitation to you to contribute, and it will be good if you have your mobile phone ready then to scan a QR code.
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- Let’s rewind, where were we in September 2019, when the previous GSDR was presented to member states at SDG Summit. That report made the assessment that targets only under TWO SDGs were on the path to achievement; health and education, in green here. We had a long way to go, back then with 11 years remaining.
- Today, we are approaching halfway point and when 2023 GSDR presented there will be 7 years remaining. What can we say today about prospects? Little did we know only 2.5 years ago that the world would be ravaged by a pandemic for 2 years and counting. These are some of the trends and changing context we will try look at it, I will go through some of these.
- **Pandemic:** Many of you are already familiar with the data. What we are compiling in the IGS at the moment is a picture showing significant setbacks in poverty, hunger and stunting of children, more child labour, for example. Some of the changes might be disruptions – positive or negative – which society will bounce back from. For example, global CO2 emissions relatively quickly bounced back after temporary drops, and it is currently not clear that we will reach peak emissions within the next 3 years as the IPCC report released this week said was needed. Some of the setbacks might be scars that will stay with us for longer and have more permanent effect on SDG achievement, like loss of education and poorer

literacy, child marriage as a coping mechanism which prevents girls' education. Some positive trends: for example, companies invested more in R&D and innovation.

- **Inequality:** We know that the pandemic has struck unequally, between countries given inequity in vaccine access, and also between socioeconomic groups within countries. Oxfam pointed to increased wealth inequality, where the richest 10 people have grown twice as rich during the pandemic. For the GSDR we will look carefully at the data, but it is very clear that while income inequality has been improved in some places and between countries, wealth inequality remains extreme at the global level. There is also increasing wealth in private hands, and less in public purses. These inequality trends are important since reduced inequality is an SDG in itself (SDG10) but also an important means or condition for other SDGs. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between low income inequality and more sustainable development, in terms of e.g. waste generation.
- **Conflict and war:** We are now facing another crisis, the war in Ukraine, with signs of potential cascading risks regionally and globally, including a potential food crisis. While it is hard to generalize impact on sustainable development from wars, we know that there are both direct effects – human suffering and lives lost (hard to put a value on) – and opportunity costs, in terms of destruction of infrastructure, loss of productivity, loss of education. In the case of Yemen, a study commissioned by UNDP in 2019 showed that had the war been stopped then, it would mean about 20 years lost on progressing the Human Development Index, and if not stopped until 2030 then almost 40 years lost. Now, hopefully we are getting closer to a solution there, but this indicates how destructive war is, not just with the suffering right now, but the huge setbacks in development and many years lost.
- Regarding environmental impact, the military is a large emitter of greenhouse gases even in peacetime, but the impact of a war is incomparable. It is the fuel and resource footprint of the military; forest fires releasing carbon and releases of hazardous substances that pollute air and water; destruction of nature reserves. And also second-tier impact of destruction of agricultural infrastructure for food production and having to rebuild infrastructure, industry, housing and agriculture rather than invest in low-carbon development.
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- But also **positive signs:**
 - Long-term climate targets: now countries have adopted net zero targets so that almost 90% of emissions are covered
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- Let me then turn to the **uptake of SDGs:** how has this changed since the last GSDR? When it comes to **awareness**, we see a steady increase, as measured here by internet searches for SDGs globally over time, despite the news value of SDGs now gone. This is encouraging.
- In terms of **knowledge**, we have seen a very strong interest from academia, with a 10-fold increase in academic publications that address SDGs.
- When it comes to **political impact of SDGs and changes in institutions**, this is harder to measure through single indicators. A forthcoming review of research, however, shows that there have been limited normative and institutional effects, in terms of changed rules and changes in organization within government, but stronger discursive impact.
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- Another review of VNRs from 56 countries found a significant potential for them to make greater use of science-based tools and methods, for example for analysing SDG interlinkages or for development of national or sectoral transformation pathways based on scenarios and modelling.

- Let me just pause here and say that this is a missed opportunity. Sustainability science has developed a range of methods, from complex quantitative models to more simple participatory process tools that allow policy-makers or companies to self-assess how their proposed actions lead to synergies or trade-offs between SDGs. In terms of findings, they show that synergies and trade-offs are very context-dependent, with few general lessons on which SDGs might be particularly synergistic. For that reason - Make use of your scientists, in your particular context, and test these tools!
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- I would like to turn an eye to the future too, if I may, and speculate a bit on what next. Very unpredictable, but I think there are three cross-cutting issues we will see and hear more about in public debate on sustainable development, and which I hope we will address in the report. 1. Accountability 2. Intergenerational equity 3. Nexus. Inspired by Stockholm+50.
- So this was a scene-setter for the next GSDR. Let us now look at how this will be prepared and how we are keen to have your input.
- SLIDE – GSDR process
- On this slide you can see the work process of the Independent Group of Scientists (IGS) , which comprises 15 scientists from around the world. The new IGS was formally established in 2020. Last year we started working virtually and In September, we had a call for inputs with a good response rate from various stakeholder organizations. This year 2022 we undertake regional consultations and in parallel draft the report. In fact, we are meeting in person for the first time next week to discuss a zero draft. Early next year, member state will get an opportunity to comment on the report and we then finally launch it at the SDG summit at UNGA in September 2023.
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- Looking at the preliminary outline, we have chosen a simple outline, similar to the previous report. The overall goal is to review and provide pathways to achieve the SDGs, by synthesising and assessing relevant scientific literature and drawing on examples and practices by states and non-state actors. We will of course also look at scientific assessments, such as the recent IPCC reports, and see the GSDR as a synthesis report.
- It will start with a scene-setting chapter, along the lines what I have discussed so far, in the first part of this presentation. We will then zoom in scientific evidence for how we can and need to acceleration transformation and use ‘levers’ in this regard. This would be followed by a chapter looking more practically at tools that are used and can be used, organized by the sectoral transformations. Finally, we wrap up with a chapter on how we can make the science-policy-society interface more effective.
- SLIDE ch 1
- To then analyse what we can do accelerate action and progress on the SDGs, we needed an analytical framework, to help us structure and guide the analysis, but also come together on a worldview; how do we think change happens in societies? I will ‘warn’ you that academics love to play with analytical frameworks and the one we have now is quite rich and complex – I think we will try to simplify it, so this is in no way a final version I am sharing with you.
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- Let us start with the analytical framework developed in the 2019 GSDR; a matrix-like structure where the challenge had been sub-divided into six broad ‘entry points’ to transformation, along the horizontal axis. We thought these six entry points, or transformations, captured really well the whole Agenda 2030, and are of course interrelated and interdependent, as shown by the arrows.

- On the vertical axis, four broad levers were identified: governance, economy and finance; individual and collective action; and science and technology.
- We thought this is a good model of how we can systematically work with levers across the entry points. For example, a carbon tax would effect many of the six transformations., same with corporate sustainability governance. However, we felt it is also quite static; it does not really help understand change in a more dynamic way, and what can both hinder and accelerate change. In the spirit of the Decade of Action, we want to focus more on acceleration.
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- So we have added a transformation pathway. Let me explain. 1. We start with the six entry points for transformation 2. We then look at the general categories of levers, but more than looking at them as broad categories of tools, we want to understand better the actual leveraging effect; how can you get a lot of impact from little effort? How can you maximise the leveraging effect. There is an exciting scientific literature on this, with the classic work by Donella Meadows on system change for example, which discusses the timing and nature of leverage points. So what is the effect of levers on the transformations? How can levers accelerate transformation pathways?
- We look at this by zooming on transformation pathways, where for a given entry point, we try to discuss at how change happens, in a more dynamic way. The idea here is change often happens along an s-shaped curve, where you first have emerging change, then seek to accelerate it, and then stabilize it. Importantly, we also need to transform 'out of' the dominant unsustainable pathway, by initially destabilizing somehow, then there is breakdown and finally phase-out.
- Let us think of energy systems as an example. We are now, I would say, in a phase of acceleration of renewable energy. We already passed through the emergence phase, with development of new technologies. A tipping point was passed when the cost of wind and solar became competitive with fossil-based energy, and now see rapid acceleration globally, as pointed out by IPCC earlier this week. There have been and are impediments along the way, such as slow permitting processes, expensive land, lack of energy storage facilities to compensate for intermittency. Removing these impediments will allow for further acceleration, up to a point where a renewable energy system is stabilized and renewables are the norm.
- At the same time, we need to phase out fossil fuels. Transformation is not only about supporting and accelerating the good things we want to see, we also need to be realistic and account properly for how to transform out of unsustainable technologies, behaviours, patterns. There are several impediments to deceleration of fossil fuels, e.g. long contracts with suppliers, lock-in into fossil infrastructure, lobbying from fossil fuel sector. A tipping point to start deceleration here could be the financial sector; when will it stop investing in fossil fuels?
- Note here I gave an example of technologies, which is the typical for transitions thinking and s-curves. But we think this framework could also be applied to social innovations, behaviour, institutions. For example, more gender equality in private sector leadership, more plant-based protein and changed diets.
- At the bottom of the s-curve you see that we divide up the transformation pathway in stages, of preparing, initiating, navigating and institutionalizing change. At each of these stages, different capacities are required, whether by policy-makers, business owners or a

collective of actors: first strategizing, then unlocking change, then orchestrating and scaling up, and then embedding. Capacity is something we want to focus on in the GSDR.

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- To show you an example of an applied way of thinking about transformation pathways, here is a figure from the Food and Land Use coalition discussing a dietary shift in Europe from meat-intensive diet to a more plant-based diet. They argue that after around 25% of the population – the early adopters and early majority – have adopted a diet more in line with human and planetary health, they estimate by 2030 approximately, then we can expect an acceleration, a faster shift.
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- They also identify which policy interventions might be introduced when, and in what sequence, to build up to accelerated change (see bottom horizontal axis): to invest in innovation and make plant-based products better performing, to build a market through public procurement and drive down price; to issue dietary guidelines and conduct public campaigns to drive cultural norms; and finally a carbon tax. Together these would improve conditions for acceleration: performance, price, convenience, cultural norms and capability. The idea is that these interventions also stimulate self-reinforcing change and positive feedback loops, such as economies of scale, learning by doing, making this shift a positive experience of new attractive options rather than limiting choices. Finally, they also anticipate impediments along the way, such as consumer backlash, lobbying from incumbents and farmer backlash.
- We think it is important to try to understand transformation pathways in this broader sense and look at dynamic effects over time, in the whole system – as opposed to considering one policy instrument at the time and its static effect.
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- But, we also want to be practical and look at what is happening now and what tools can be used in the short term. So in chapter 3 we are looking to identify key tools that are used, organized by ‘entry point’, and help share best practice. For example, concrete tools to push the transformation towards sustainable and just economies can address global supply chains. Here there is a range of tools that can be used, from company regulations on due diligence and corporate reporting and voluntary management systems, to international labelling and certification schemes, for example in forestry, fishery, garments. Other concrete tools we are looking at for other entry points include for example awards and prizes, best practice initiatives.
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- The last chapter looks at how we can strengthen the science-policy interface for SDG acceleration. Here we want to recognize that we are no longer operating in a narrow, linear model where scientists provide evidence and advice to policy-maker in a transactional way. Rather, what we see today are processes of co-development of knowledge, where the scientific process is opened up and the focus is on actionable advice and joint learning. We also want to emphasise that we do not only need to mobilise science at the level of policy, but much more at implementation level: what works in practice? What are for example the behavioural barriers that need to be overcome?
- There are today many good roadmaps for improving the SPI and it is encouraging to see how many research funders align their funding strategies with the SDGs. I would urge all of you who are policy-makers to really make use of science as a global public good and a practical resource for you. Invite scientists to be seconded to your departments, engage in policy labs,

propose research topics and identify knowledge gaps you need filled. The science-policy interface should not be just supply-driven, but must also be demand-driven.

- A persistent problem, however, that we will discuss in the report is the high inequality between resources for R&D in the global North and South, and what this means for who is producing knowledge, on what and how.
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- Now I would like to turn to you, to extend an invitation to all of the participants here today and to those of you joining online – please help us co-develop knowledge here!
- *We know that there is a wealth of knowledge and experience in the room, and joining the forum online, and the IGS would like to learn more about interventions you have made to advance SDG implementation. We are especially interested in interventions in which the actors used two or more of the levers that I described, preferably in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner.*
- *Together with partners in GIZ, the IGS and GSDR secretariat have prepared a brief questionnaire, linked to the QR code here on the slide. Please take a look, and if you have a relevant example please submit it sometime during the Forum this week. It should only take 5 minutes to complete this very short questionnaire, and the IGS may then be in touch with you to seek further information and invite you to a consultation later in the year.*
- *You will find submission instructions on the questionnaire.*
- *With that, thank you very much for your attention!*