

UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development  
30 Mar 2023, Geneva

Dear co- chairs,

Thank you for the opportunity to share inputs at this closing plenary as a representative of the regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism. My name is Natasha Dokovska from Journalists for Human Rights.

The Forum has provided a number of **opportunities** for civil society to engage and provide important inputs on the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. We **appreciate the support** and engagement of the UNECE Secretariat and the co-chairs.

In the 2030 Agenda all UN Member States have committed to engage Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the SDG process. Our civil society engagement mechanism, **ECE-RCEM**, is the **recognised organiser** of civil society in this fora.

We recognise that the Regional Forum is a crucial space for civil society to share our experiences as implementers of the 2030 Agenda. **The right** for civil society and trade unions to be equal partners in this dialogue, including its side events, is enshrined in the UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/290. We have heard from many Member States about the **importance of civil society engagement**. We all here are working voluntarily to engage diverse civil society. Therefore, we call on Member States to support the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism financially.

**It is clear** that the overlapping **global crises**, in particular the consequences of the war in the Ukraine, of the COVID-19 pandemic, of climate change and of systemic forms of discrimination, continue to have a huge impact on our societies. The energy crisis, cost of living and food crisis are pushing many into poverty..

The **responses of many governments**, and of international financial and trade institutions, have been manifestly inadequate and inequitable. Financial relief packages, public services, and other forms of support are inaccessible to many who are marginalised, work in the informal sector as unpaid caregivers, or face stigma and discrimination; and continue to fund **unsustainable practices** that continue to **cause inequities globally**.

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The **debt crisis** is worsening, and we urgently need debt cancellation strategies to address these global structures of inequality.

Conflict and violence are on the rise. The world is facing the **highest number** of violent conflicts since World War II, and two billion people live in places affected by conflict. The Russian aggression against Ukraine took centre stage, though this is not the only conflict in our region.

The war and all these conflicts have **dire global, environmental, and human implications** in terms of access to basic needs: food, safe shelter, education, health and energy.

Climate change impacts on the environment and is accelerating and **destroying lives and livelihoods**. The need to end our reliance on fossil fuels could not be more evident. Yet countries are backtracking on their commitment to phase out coal instead of switching to renewable energy.

We should **urgently embark on transformative changes** towards a circular, decarbonised and zero pollution industry. Citizens and the least fortunate must not be forced to pay the price of industrial polluters, the **polluter pays principle** must be upheld.

**Democracy and the rule of law** are increasingly under attack. Even before the pandemic, massive and rising inequality – income, racial and gender – was already contributing to civil unrest and distrust in democracy, which is exploited by far right and populist leaders across the region.

Racism, discrimination, populism and oppression **cost lives**, as the persecution of those fleeing conflict.

Governments and anti-gender actors around the region are **targeting** transgender as well as gender non-binary people. They are pushing false and harmful narratives about these communities, with the purpose of **inciting fear, spreading moral panic, and undermining human rights**. This is leading to increased stigma, discrimination and violence committed against these communities more than ever before.

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States should recognize that **human rights do not distinguish between persons**, they are, in their construction, universal, indivisible and inalienable, and a foundation to achieving sustainable development.

In terms of the Agenda, we are actively engaged in raising awareness among all stakeholders but still much more needs to be done for its implementation. We do see increasing awareness on issues of sustainability but budgets and government plans are still **nowhere near** setting out realistic plans to deliver the SDGs by 2030.

## In terms of financing for the Agenda, we recommend:

- Support the “Bridgetown agenda” to **reform the global financial architecture**: it is not about charity but rather about responsibility, and it has become urgent.
- Develop an SDG ‘stimulus package’ that guarantees a just recovery from the pandemic that ensures financing reaches frontline communities directly as well as communities on the margins.
- **Cancel debt** of least developed countries to ensure that a just recovery and just transition can be properly financed. There is no justice in prioritising payment to global lenders over the needs of those facing the impacts of the pandemic and rising famine.
- Provide **local support** directly to communities that face exclusion, this should include the provision of small scale grants to those who are most often left behind to deliver a just eco-social transition.

## Priority areas for transformative action include

- Develop a concrete action plan to move ‘**beyond GDP**’ and transform our economic systems so that it first serves life and the wellbeing of people and the planet, and no longer consider the environment as unlimited and free resources
- Promote the creation of decent and climate friendly jobs with just transition in key areas such as sustainable infrastructure and the care economy, with a labour protection floor for all, minimum living wages and equal pay

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- Provide good practice guidelines on national and local planning so that all levels of government in the region align their policies to deliver the SDGs
- Establish a regional exchange process to share good practice on civil society engagement so that stakeholder dialogue processes are improved across the region.
- Prioritise community-led renewable energy and energy efficiency approaches, which decentralise access and ensure affordable clean energy for all - prosumers
- Ensure equitable universal access to health and social protection
- Ensure better protection of the human rights of older persons through a UN Convention for the Rights of Older Persons
- Repeal punitive laws that criminalise, police, or discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons, and enact protective policies that recognize and uphold the human rights of all persons and ensure their access to development.
- Stop all forms of pollution of our waterways, which leads to toxic rivers and seas, instead invest in ensuring water cleanliness and implement the new agreements on the protection of marine environments to improve biodiversity and prioritise all life forms in the water and on land.
- And finally Stop Russia's brutal and illegal war in Ukraine and reduce military expenditure across the region, divert this spending to deliver on the social and environmental transition

## **On how member States better include Civil society actors and voices in their decision making we would like to add:**

- We are particularly concerned about attempts to pass special laws restricting civil society in a number of countries. For example in March this year in Georgia, this legal initiative faced massive civil protests. Currently, in Kyrgyzstan, such a bill is before Parliament. We urge parliamentarians not to

accept this law as contrary to international standards and capable of destroying an independent civil society.

- Develop further spaces for exchange between civil society, academia and member states before HLPF, eg. for example by holding a specific session on civil society engagement on VNRs during each UNECE Regional Forum
- Reinforce the role of social dialogue and ensure broad stakeholder engagement in the context of VNRs, especially of groups that are being repeatedly left behind. Ensure that consultations are accessible and meet the needs of all, including persons with disabilities.
- It is also important to recognize that the VNR report and reporting at HLPF should not be the end of engagement - there must be follow up and continuous review of the implementation of the SDGs with civil society
- States can ensure a more balanced and nuanced representation of progress and challenges of the SDGs by dedicating a part of the State report to civil society.

**Halfway there, but nowhere near  
The need for peace and action is loud and clear**

Thank you.