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## Economic Commission for Europe

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

#### Seventh session

Geneva, 29 and 30 March 2023

## Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe region on its seventh session

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## I. Attendance

1. The seventh 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 29 and 30 March 2023. The session was co-chaired by Ambassador Miloš Prica, Chair of the Council on the Implementation of SDGs, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ambassador Markus Reubi, Delegate of the Federal Council for the 2030 Agenda, Switzerland.
2. The session was attended by representatives of the following 52 ECE member States: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uzbekistan.
3. The following non-member States of ECE attended: Brazil, Iraq, South Africa, Tunisia. The non-member observer State of Palestine also attended the session.
4. The European Union (EU) was represented by the Delegation of the EU to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva. The European Commission, the European Environment Agency, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights and the European Investment Bank also attended.
5. Representatives of the following United Nations bodies, departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations and initiatives attended the meeting: Economic Commission for Africa, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, International Telecommunication Union, Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Development Coordination Office, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, United Nations Headquarters, United Nations Global Compact, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Office at Geneva, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Population Fund, UN Water, United Nations World Tourism Organization, World Health Organization, World Food Programme, World Intellectual Property Organization and World Meteorological Organization. UN Resident Coordinators and representatives from their offices from 15 countries and the UN Development Coordinator in Kosovo<sup>1</sup> also attended.
6. Representatives of the following intergovernmental and regional organizations participated in the session: Asian Development Bank, Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, Economic Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Development Bank, Eurasian Economic Commission, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European Forest Institute, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, International Development Law Organization, International Organization for Standardization, International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Regional Cooperation Council, Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus, Union for the Mediterranean, United Cities and Local Governments.
7. Representatives of about 200 non-governmental organizations as well as representatives of academia, the private sector, and other organizations also participated. The

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo in this report shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)

list of participants can be found on the website of the regional forum (<https://regionalforum.unece.org/events/regional-forum-2023>).

## II. Opening and adoption of the agenda

8. The regional forum adopted the provisional agenda of the session, contained in ECE/RFSD/2023/1.

9. In their opening remarks, the Co-Chairs of the forum, Ambassador Prica and Ambassador Reubi, stressed that the meeting was taking place at a particularly challenging time. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the multiple crises are hampering SDG progress, all of which is worsened by the ongoing war in Ukraine. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. In addition, structural problems persist in the region such as inequality, migration, and climate change. SDG progress is insufficient and efforts must be redoubled to avert a further crisis of sustainable development. However, the attendance of the Forum by a high number of participants is in itself a source of hope and commitment to the 2030 Agenda. At the halfway point to 2030, policies and innovative solutions are needed to accelerate SDG progress and cushion the impacts of the crises. There are good examples within the region that need to be scaled up. There is a need to work together and forge strong partnerships between civil society and the private sector, including scientists and statisticians and crucially, young people, who have the right to live in a healthy society on a healthy planet. This forum is an opportunity for the region to underscore its role as a global champion of sustainable development and bring strong messages to the SDG Summit in September.

10. In her video message, the Deputy Secretary-General highlighted the cascading crises that are affecting the ECE region at the current moment including geopolitical tensions, the climate crisis, the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the rising costs of financing which strongly affect fragile economies. Despite these headwinds however, change is possible with examples like the EU Green New Deal as well as large fiscal stimulus packages used to soften the impact of the pandemic. The commitment of young people is also a source of hope and will be supported through the new UN Youth Office. There is strong progress being made in digitalization in the region as well as in the transition to renewable and efficient energy systems, efforts to scale up water resource management and in infrastructure provision. There is global momentum from major UN events such as COP27, the recent 30x30 Biodiversity Framework and the treaty on high seas. The SDG Summit in September marks a critical opportunity to chart a new course to achieve transformative change. Efforts should focus on an SDG Stimulus package and on policy changes that can have multiplier effects on key transitions.

11. The ECOSOC President in her video message affirmed the importance of the Regional Forum as a milestone in a series of events leading up to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in July and then to the centrepiece of this year's events, the SDG Summit in September. In many areas the world is off target to achieve the 2030 Agenda. However, since its adoption in 2015, it is important to recognize that progress has been achieved particularly in reducing child and maternal mortality, digitalization facilitating access to information as well as access to finance for rural populations, and the growth of renewable energy technologies. There has been almost universal uptake of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, with this year, the EU becoming the first supranational organization to present a voluntary review, paving the way for others in the future. The results of the VNRs show that progress has been made, but further acceleration is needed, requiring deep structural changes, doing away with business-as-usual approaches to sustainable development, and providing better financing. The promise of solidarity and prosperity made in 2015 must be kept.

12. The Executive Secretary of ECE reiterated how far the region is away from achieving the 2030 Agenda. Especially concerning the war in Ukraine, peace is needed in line with the UN charter and international law. At the same time, the speaker called to remain hopeful and confident in the ability to deliver a better future for all. The current situation demands policies and actions with far-reaching impacts to create transformational change,

taking advantage of synergies to ensure acceleration. The goals under review this year are those in which ECE possesses technical expertise; on SDG 6, the ECE Water Convention is a key tool for transboundary water cooperation. On SDG 11, the Forum of Mayors supports the role of cities and local authorities in driving forward SDG progress. The 70<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission will take place next month under the theme of Digital and Green Transformations for Sustainable Development, providing new insights and impulses for work in these areas and thereby contributing to SDG 9.

13. The Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS shared information on the regional UN System's work to better support the acceleration of sustainable development. The Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP) has strengthened synergies and improved collaboration of regional UN entities to support the UN Country Teams on the ground. A regional knowledge management hub is being further developed for the region; enhanced transparency is provided with the third annual regional UN System results report; a business development strategy at regional level increases efficiencies and reduces operational costs; the Issue-based Coalitions (IBCs) with specific thematic priorities provide technical advice and support to UN Country Teams and strengthen policy coherence and joint advocacy. Priority actions for 2023 include supporting the Country Teams for the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future; advancing green technology for a just energy transition, supporting governments in preparations for COP28; advancing work on food security; continuing work on digital transformation and responding to refugee and internal displacement crises generated by the war in Ukraine.

### **III. High-level Policy Segment “Ensuring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the ECE Region in times of multiple crises”**

14. The high-level policy segment was informed on the state of SDG progress in the region through a presentation of the findings of the annual ECE SDG Progress Report<sup>2</sup>.

15. The following delegations intervened in the ensuing high-level plenary debate in protocol order: Hungary, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Croatia, Moldova, Portugal, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, United States, Czechia, Serbia, EU, Israel, Poland, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, United Kingdom. Representatives of civil society and youth reported back from preparatory meetings and consultations. The Russian Federation as well as the EU and Ukraine exercised their rights of reply at the end of the session.

### **IV. Peer learning round tables<sup>3</sup>**

#### **(a) Round tables – First set**

*SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation: Water and Sanitation for all*

Lead Organizers: ECE, UNESCO

Moderators: Marco Keiner, ECE; Ana Luiza Massot Thompson-Flores, UNESCO

Substantive inputs presented by: Czechia, Finland, Georgia, Israel, Montenegro, Netherlands, Serbia, Tajikistan, EU, DiploriA, Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (ECE-RCEM), International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC), IUCN, Lavazza Group, Suez Group, UN-Water

<sup>2</sup> The report is available at: <https://w3.unece.org/sdg2023/>

<sup>3</sup> Further information on the peer learning round tables is available at <https://regionalforum.unece.org/events/round-tables-regional-forum-2023>

*SDG 7 - Affordable and Clean Energy: Accelerating the energy transition and enhancing energy system resiliency through increased energy efficiency and renewable energy*

Lead Organizers: ECE, UNDP

Moderators: Dario Liguti, ECE; Hans-Juergen Walter, Deloitte

Substantive inputs presented by: Georgia, Germany, North Macedonia, Ukraine, ACCIONA Energy, DZ Bank, EBRD, ECE-RCEM, Eurasian Development Bank, Habitat for Humanity, Luxembourg Stock Exchange, RES Foundation, University of Exeter, Vanguard Properties, UNDP

**(b) Round tables – Second set***SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities: Cities and the new multilateralism*

Lead Organizers: ECE, UN Habitat Geneva Liaison Office

Moderator: Achim Wennmann, Geneva Graduate Institute

Substantive inputs presented by: Moldova, Slovenia, Athens, Bishkek, Bonn, London, Madrid, Tirana, Cities Alliance, City Diplomacy Lab, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, ECE-RCEM, Geneva Cities Hub, Housing Europe, OneWorks on Mykolaiv, UN Resident Coordinator Turkmenistan

*SDG 9 (Part one) – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Green, Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure*

Lead Organizers: ECE, UNIDO

Moderators: Yuwei Li, ECE; Frank Van Rompaey, UNIDO

Substantive inputs presented by: France, Georgia, Italy, Poland, ECE-RCEM, European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC), Norm Cement, OneWorks, Renault Group, World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations

*SDG 9 (part two) – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Transformative Innovation to accelerate Sustainable Development*

Lead Organizer: ECE

Moderator: Kjell-Hakan Närfelt, Swedish Innovation Agency

Substantive inputs presented by: Slovenia, Uzbekistan, Climate KIC, Connected Places Catapult, ECE-RCEM, PurCity

*SDGs 9 & 17 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure & Partnerships for the Goals: Partnerships for inclusive and sustainable digital development*

Lead Organizers: UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia, ITU, WMO

Moderator: Natalia Mochu, ITU

Substantive inputs presented by: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland, ARCEP, DG CNECT, ECE-RCEM, ECMWF, Kyrgyz Internet Society, PortugalSpace, Waste Ukraine Analytics, UNEP, UN Women

## **V. Plenary session: Halfway towards 2030 – accelerating transformations to achieving the SDGs in the ECE region**

16. At the outset of the plenary session, the following delegations intervened: Armenia, Belarus, Azerbaijan which were unable to speak in the High-level Policy Segment due to time reasons. This was followed by the introduction of the key messages from the peer learning sessions by the Co-Chairs.

17. In a video message, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs warned that the promises of the SDGs are in jeopardy, that progress has stalled and, in some cases, reversed. It is time now to turbocharge actions, drive transformations and make decisive investments. The SDG Summit must be a rallying cry to pivot from crisis to a more peaceful, inclusive and green future. The Summit might consider the reform of the international financial architecture and the transformation of the global economy so that it is sustainable, resilient, and inclusive; advancing high quality basic services that guarantee health, education and human dignity; ideas for practical ways to achieve rapid decarbonisation to limit global temperature rise and scaling up support for developing countries to adapt to current and future crises, leaving no-one behind.

18. The Co-Chairs then introduced the multi-stakeholder panel composed of the following speakers:

- Åsa Persson, Research Director and Deputy Director at the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Member of the Independent Group of Scientists for the 2023 UN Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)
- László Borbély, State Counsellor to the Prime Minister, Romania
- Dušan Čarkic, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Environmental Protection, Serbia
- Patrick Odier, President of Swiss Sustainable Finance, Chairman of the Board of Directors at Bank Lombard Odier & Co. Ltd.
- Natasha Dokovska, ECE-RCEM
- Arina Loginova, Network Coordinator, Sustainable Development Solutions Network Youth in Russia

19. The following delegations intervened during the plenary debate: United States of America, Belarus, EU, Switzerland, Council of Europe. A representative from Civil Society also spoke. The delegation of Armenia used their right of reply in response to the intervention from Azerbaijan at the beginning of the plenary session.

20. A summary of the discussions in the plenaries and peer learning sessions is contained in the annex. Written statements are available on the website of the [regional forum](#).

## VI. Closing

21. In her closing remarks, the ECE Executive Secretary expressed her gratitude to those that supported the preparations for the Forum, the secretariat organizing team, the regional UN system entities as well as the member States who provided financial support: Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. She also emphasized that strong collaboration between the regional and country levels is required for achieving the SDGs and ECE works closely with Resident Coordinators and Country Teams to make this happen.

22. Before closing the meeting, the Co-Chairs thanked organizers and participants and explained that the draft report of the Regional Forum, including the Co-Chairs' summary of discussions, would be circulated for comments by participants. The final version will constitute the official input from the ECE region to the 2023 HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC.

## Co-Chairs' summary of the discussions

### High-level policy segment on the theme “Ensuring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the ECE Region in times of multiple crises”

1. The picture that emerges from the 2023 SDG progress report prepared by ECE shows that much progress is required halfway to 2030. The study, which is elaborated based on a methodology shared by all regional commissions, shows that the region will achieve only 21 out of 169 SDG targets by 2030. This is down from 26 targets assessed as on track last year. For 79 targets, progress must accelerate, up from 64 last year. As in the previous assessment, the current trends need to be reversed for 15 targets. Data availability has improved as in this year's assessment it was possible to cover ten more targets than in 2022. However, data are still insufficient for assessing 54 targets.
2. Looking at the SDGs under in-depth review at the 2023 HLPF, it is clear that there is no room for complacency. Only one target pertaining to SDG 6, access to safely managed water, is on track, albeit there has been some progress regarding water stress and water efficiency. Access to energy is widespread but this is the only target on track for SDG 7. On SDG 9, the situation is better, with good performance in three targets but persistent backsliding regarding infrastructure development. Progress towards SDG 11 remains mixed, but no trend needs to be reversed to achieve the target by 2030. Regarding SDG 17, four targets would be missed if current dynamics are not reversed, although the region is doing well regarding Internet use and broadband subscriptions.
3. Multiple crises, which are not yet fully reflected in the available data, have impaired SDG implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic was a setback that prompted the need to adopt health initiatives but also to strengthen social protection and support economic activity. The war in Ukraine and growing economic uncertainty are adding to the obstacles to advance the 2030 Agenda. The climate and biodiversity crises and unabated environmental degradation continue to hinder progress. However, despite these difficulties, participants stressed the need to enhance efforts to meet the SDGs.
4. The 2030 Agenda remains the only global roadmap for overcoming and recovering from the current difficulties we are experiencing and creating more resilient societies. The SDG Summit in September 2023 will offer the opportunity to provide new impetus to advance this Agenda and to reinvigorate global efforts towards a green, fair and more sustainable global economy that leaves no one behind. The crisis should stimulate positive action and change, leading to high-impact initiatives in a time that demands solidarity, leadership and commitment.
5. Progress in gender equality remains essential to advance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda and should inform all actions, but some reversals have been observed since the pandemic. In the United Kingdom, the Women and Girls Strategy centralised the gender equality as critical for these three dimensions .
6. The protection of people from marginalised groups when trying to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of various shocks has been a central concern in policies implemented in the region as a response to recent crises. In Serbia, various initiatives have focused on obtaining timely and reliable data for identifying most deserving targets for support. In Turkmenistan, food security has been an important direction.
7. The process of institutional development and the elaboration and alignment of strategies and plans with the 2030 Agenda has continued throughout the region, taking into account changing circumstances. In some countries, like the Republic of Moldova and Serbia, these initiatives have also been linked to advances in EU integration. In Germany, six transformation areas were defined that have been mirrored by interministerial teams. In

Armenia, SDGs are seen as a way to deliver internal reforms and develop a Transformation Strategy 2050, which provides a framework for SDG implementation. In Azerbaijan, the process of alignment has culminated in a strategy for socioeconomic development 2022-2026 with an action plan fully integrated with the SDGs.

8. Education and qualified human resources can provide a significant impetus to sustainable development. In Romania, an initiative has been put in place to train experts that strengthen capabilities in various related areas in different ministries. More generally, increasing public awareness is crucial for successful implementation, which involves informing and educating the public about the relevance of each goal and its interdependencies.

9. Besides the institutional and policy aspects, initiatives to engage different actors, including academia, science, the private sector, and society at large, remain an important focus for SDG implementation. Multistakeholder partnerships at all levels should be developed, with a particular emphasis on those who are disproportionately affected or left behind.

10. Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) have provided a mechanism to coordinate efforts among various actors and rally support for implementation. They are being used to build partnerships with a wide range of actors, including various levels of administration, academia, civil society and social partners, albeit the level of engagement varies across the region. Austria has conducted preparatory meetings with different partners, including representatives from the Global South, to gain additional insights. VNRs have also served to identify solutions to accelerate progress in areas that were lagging. Initiatives presented have included not only domestic efforts but also those related to international action, which will figure prominently in the forthcoming voluntary review of the EU. Civil society suggested that draft VNRs would be discussed at the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

11. Progress towards sustainable development requires SDG localisation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, many local governments have sustainable development strategies in place that are aligned with the country SDG framework, as promoted by the SDG Council. In Germany, several cities have published voluntary local reviews to showcase best practices, and a national online community for engagement at the local level has been launched. Involving local governments in the implementation of SDGs is crucial. Various delegations stressed the useful role that the ECE Forum of Mayors can play to facilitate this engagement.

12. Rapid urbanization and the role of cities in economic dynamism is highlighting the importance of strategies that address territorial development challenges, both regarding large cities and rural areas, as recent initiatives in Kazakhstan. Equal regional development has been emphasized in Croatia's National Development Strategy 2030, which is guided by the 2030 Agenda. Moldova has supported local development through a major infrastructure programme for local communities. A National Strategy for Smart Cities has been developed in Portugal.

13. Stronger partnerships between developed and developing countries, which have fewer resources to implement the 2030 Agenda, are required. Increased support is necessary not only in terms of official development assistance, but also other forms of financing, both public and private. The United Kingdom is driving innovative solutions to unlock financing for development and tackle infrastructure needs. The United States Action Plan on Global Water Security seeks to strengthen local and global systems to meet the needs of underserved populations. Israel has promoted international cooperation efforts to establish water responsible and inclusive policies. Portugal has made gender equality and women's empowerment a cross cutting priority in its Development Cooperation Strategy 2030. The EU has sought to contribute to the advancement of the multilateral agenda through the Global Gateway Strategy and the Neighbourhood Development International Cooperation Instrument.

14. Subregional cooperation can provide a significant impulse to SDG implementation. Bosnia and Herzegovina launched the Western Balkans SDG Forum as a platform to share



and exchange knowledge and policies regarding the SDGs. Initiatives in Central Asia, including by Kazakhstan, have also sought to further subregional cooperation in support of SDGs.

15. Regional cooperation is essential to fulfill the 2030 Agenda; ECE has a critical role to play in this regard, in particular in relation to the SDGs under in-depth review at the 2023 HLPF and the support provided to Central Asia and Western Balkans countries. Overall, close cooperation and common solutions are called for, in the spirit of partnership and shared responsibility. Current difficulties can only be tackled by joint efforts that translate into concrete and tangible projects. The challenges that affect us today stretch far beyond borders and can only be solved together, acting in solidarity.

16. Developing public policies that promote SDGs requires precise, reliable, updated, and comparable data, including satellite data, as emphasized by Switzerland. Appropriate investment is required to obtain the necessary statistics, as a basis for evidence-based decisions. Scientific research and advice should guide policy actions, being a source of innovative solutions that contributes to the attainment of all goals. In Austria, a network of universities and scientists will actively engage in the second voluntary national review.

17. The war in Ukraine and its consequences were reflected in the interventions of many delegations. Hungary underlined its negative impacts for European economies and the adverse implications of bloc divisions. Moldova stated that, despite all difficulties, it remains committed to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees. Israel expressed concerns on the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on civilians and called for ensuring rapid humanitarian aid. Ukraine denounced the Russian aggression and stated that the SDGs form the basis of the recovery plan from the consequences of the war. In Czechia, the large inflow of Ukrainian refugees has prompted multiple initiatives to improve housing availability. Poland stated that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine must stop, and underlined that the invasion strengthened solidarity and the resolve to transform economies towards more dynamic development of renewable energy sources. The United Kingdom emphasised how the invasion of Ukraine has resulted in destruction and impacted the region's ability to realize Agenda 2030. Austria and Germany aligned themselves with the EU statement condemning Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which impairs the fulfilments of all SDGs. The Russian Federation rejected all the accusations and stated that sanctions introduced by Western countries undermine the achievement of SDGs. Belarus also emphasized the negative consequences of sanctions for sustainable development.

18. The report from the Civil Society Forum, which was attended by both the Co-Chairs and the ECE Executive Secretary highlighted the regression in SDG implementation, under the impact of multiple crises, in a context of increased violence against women, workers and the LGBTI community, and rising inequality. It was highlighted that there has been a marked increase in military expenditure in the region, diverting funds from health, education and social spending. Civil society space is shrinking in parts of the region including through legislation directed against civil society organizations. The crises should not be used as an excuse to backtrack progress but to redouble efforts. The integrity of all countries and the dignity and the rights of all people in their diversity should be respected. Civil society should participate in decision-making as well as the development of VNRs, and alternative SDG reports should be taken into account to define policies.

19. The report on the youth consultations also pointed to the backsliding in advancing the 2030 Agenda, with direct negative impacts on the young. A call was made to remove barriers preventing the participation of the young on decisions that affect them. Policies that are being made for the young cannot be made without them. Young people are facing intersecting forms of discrimination that need to be addressed. Access to water and sanitation must be recognized as a human rights issue, in particular for vulnerable groups. Insecure and unfair working conditions need to be confronted.

## Outcomes of the peer learning round tables

### (a) First set of round tables

#### *SDG 6: Water and sanitation for all*

20. The ECE region is not on track in achieving SDG 6 which in turn hinders the achievement of many other goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. Many good regional practices and tools to accelerate progress are available, but for these to be effective water action needs to be prioritized at the political level.

21. The UN 2023 Water Conference (New York, 22-24 March) underlined the need to urgently scale up action to address the water and sanitation crisis and ensure equitable access to water and sanitation for all. It constituted an important opportunity to catalyse action by all stakeholders and triggered more than 700 commitments now part of the Water Action Agenda. It is crucial to implement and finance these commitments and regularly review their progress. Water should be integrated in the agenda of the upcoming political Summits and processes beyond the water sector, in major events such as the COPs on climate and on biodiversity.

22. In the ECE region, while access to safely managed drinking water services is available for 96% of the population, with 20 countries having achieved universal access, access to sanitation remains a challenge, with 27 million people lacking access to even basic sanitation services. Aggregated data also frequently masks inequalities. Policies and investments should focus on flattening the existing disparities between urban and rural areas, on ensuring affordability and providing access to disproportionately affected and marginalized groups and in specific settings such as schools and hospitals, as well as addressing menstrual health issues. The Protocol on Water and Health, through its support to self-assessments on the equity of access, progressive target setting mechanism and reporting framework as well as support to WASH in schools and healthcare facilities, demonstrated to be a useful tool for realizing the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

23. Thanks to advances in domestic wastewater treatment, point source water pollution has decreased overall across the region. However, wastewater discharges remain significant with great variability between sub-regions and countries. Plastic pollution, both macro, micro and nano plastics, is also a common concern for public health, freshwater and the ocean. The fast development of the mining sector in some countries represents additional pollution risks, when not coupled with strong policies and enforcement mechanisms. Improving water quality and protecting ecosystems and biodiversity require concerted action, as promoted by the EU Water Framework Directive and the EU Green Deal, which provides a set of policy initiatives for improving the quality of water resources and their sustainable management and incentivize investments in sustainable water-related projects. Action should focus on preventing diffuse pollution, pollution at source and throughout product lifecycles, especially of persistent and hazardous pollutants and microplastics, as well as conserving and restoring ecosystems.

24. Hydrological changes induced by climate change, such as increasing frequency and magnitude of floods and droughts, aquatic ecosystems degradation and altered river flows, cause human and economic damage, make sustainable water management more challenging and negatively impact freshwater ecosystems. Possible measures to address these problems include improved access to and exchange of data, including geospatial ones, for effective flood and drought forecasting, water demand management and inclusive basin management plans. Water should be mainstreamed into Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), climate policies and disaster risk reduction strategies. Nature-based solutions, such as natural water retention or wetland restoration, represent effective and affordable approaches to improve resilience to climate shocks, stresses, and disasters. These solutions, which are increasingly promoted in the region, also support source-to-sea management and coastal zone protection. Tools such as the IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions can support good practice to help countries integrate nature-based solutions into water management.

25. Growing water demand, increased water stress and scarcity call for improved vertical and horizontal governance, deployment of innovative technologies and intensified cooperation among stakeholders, public and private sectors, and countries, to improve water use efficiency and foster circular economy approaches. Examples of companies taking innovative actions - e.g. on wastewater reuse for energy and agriculture or increase of water use efficiency - need to be bolstered. Adequate policies supporting wastewater and nutrient reuse in agriculture and industry - while ensuring safety – bring substantial economic benefits and help addressing water-use efficiency, while protecting the environment. Participatory, multi-stakeholder and intersectoral water-food-energy-ecosystem nexus assessments such as the one successfully carried out in the Alazani River Basin using the ECE Water Convention nexus methodology have helped to improve resource use efficiency.

26. The Pan-European region represents the most advanced region globally as regards transboundary water cooperation, with 20 countries having all their transboundary basin areas covered by operational arrangements for water cooperation, out of the 24 having achieved this result at global level. This achievement is due also to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention). Since its adoption in 1992, more than 100 agreements have been developed on shared waters. However, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus and on groundwaters transboundary cooperation is still insufficient. The examples of advanced basin organizations such as the Sava commission and the Finnish-Swedish commission show that transboundary cooperation can bring concrete benefits not only for water but also for climate action and resilience, energy and food security, fisheries, and biodiversity. Sufficient financing for transboundary cooperation and involvement of civil society, as in the Dniester basin, strengthening capacity and improving availability and exchange of information should be fostered.

27. It is crucial to reinforce inclusive, multi stakeholder and integrated water governance for the successful and coherent implementation of SDG 6 and of the Agenda 2030 as a whole. This calls for the establishment of inclusive and participatory mechanisms of concertation and decision-making which take into account the voices of young people. Women’s equal leadership and mainstreaming gender considerations in decision making are also central. Existing instruments such as the Water Convention, Protocol on Water and Health and EU instruments should be made use of and expanded.

*SDG 7: Accelerating the energy transition and enhancing energy system resiliency through increased energy efficiency and renewable energy*

28. Advancing the implementation of SDG7 represents a critical contribution to reaching climate goals, ensuring environmental sustainability and providing the necessary infrastructure for a prosperous future for all. Integrated thinking and policymaking, good governance and cross-sectoral actions to improve energy efficiency and the scale of renewable energy deployment, determine the pace of energy transition.

29. The evidence-based 2022 ECE Policy Brief on SDG7 confirmed positive trends, though recognized that the region is falling short on the broader role that energy must play in the quest for a sustainable future. The changing energy backdrop adds urgency to advance SDG7 targets to improve the resilience of energy systems, including by addressing policy challenges around the supply chains that will underpin the green transition.

30. In 2019, the ECE region accounted for 38 percent of the world total energy supply (TES), down from 61 percent in 1990. The pace of improvement in energy intensity accelerated from 2010 to 2019 compared to the period from 1990 to 2010 and outpaced the global rate of improvement. The share of renewable energy in total final energy consumption more than doubled between 1990 and 2019, from 5.8% to 12.8%. However, the Eastern part of the region has been lagging in the attraction of investment, amid persistent barriers. Existing government plans could reverse this situation.

31. Recent data and ongoing trends show that ECE countries are not on track to meet the commitments of the Paris agreement. The war in Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis are having negative impacts, with some member States having reverted to unsustainable energy sources. Strengthened action is therefore needed by countries and all stakeholders to move

towards a decarbonized energy system by accelerating the deployment of renewable energy and improving efficiency in the production, transmission, distribution, and consumption of energy. Attention should be paid to digital solutions to substantially contribute to this acceleration.

32. Despite ongoing progress in increasing energy efficiency and renewable generation, there are multiple barriers that slow down the pace of the transition. These include, among others, the availability of critical raw materials, flawed policy frameworks, fossil fuel subsidies, lack of enabling market mechanisms, and insufficient reliable data.

33. At the same time, many technical, regulatory, and financial solutions exist and have been successfully deployed. Good practices that have replication potential include energy markets structuring and taxation mechanisms, notably in the residential sector. Raising public awareness to increase citizens' participation and contribution can accelerate change. Communication with energy consumers should show the multiple benefits of increased energy efficiency and renewable energy deployment and thus stimulate end-user demand for both technical and non-technical solutions.

34. The energy transition requires massive investment in clean technologies and infrastructure that needs to be financed. Instruments that improve the risk- return profile of investments, such as government guarantees, subsidies or other credit enhancers can be deployed to attract increased private financing. New financial products can tap into the growing investor interest on sustainability.

35. A successful shift from barriers to solutions can be driven by trust and transparency, training and education with a particular focus on youth, and willingness to collaborate on achieving the common goals premised on the principles of just transition. All key actors have a role to support governments to adopt the necessary policies to ensure energy affordability and system resiliency, as well as environmental sustainability in the ECE region.

36. International cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including regarding renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, is critical, given the existing differences across countries. This should ensure that the adequate financing for energy infrastructure and technology upgrading to supply modern and sustainable energy services for all is available.

37. Policymakers may consider that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. National circumstances and capabilities need to be taken into account. Long term objectives should be included in the design of current policies. There is a need to address behavioural barriers that constrain innovation and prevent harnessing the potential of digitalization. The energy transition would have significant implications in labour markets, with changes in the skills demanded. While some workers would be negatively affected, skills shortages will emerge in other areas. A just energy transition requires providing appropriate support, including gender-responsive measures, for the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, while attending to the needs of the most vulnerable sectors of the population.

38. Resiliency concerns should be integrated into existing and related planning efforts. End user resiliency can be improved by avoiding unnecessary energy use (energy waste) and increasing the efficiency of the necessary use (energy efficiency). In particular, the deployment of renewables and the energy transition will generate soaring demand for critical raw materials, that needs to be appropriately managed, including through the application of circularity principles. Climate change is already a reality, which will impact further energy supply and demand.

39. The ultimate goal of policies supporting the energy transition is to ensure the adequate balance of energy affordability, reliability and environmental sustainability. A resilient energy system is one where energy makes an optimal contribution to a country's social, economic, and environmental development. At the same time, the system should be able to withstand and recover quickly from any unanticipated shocks while reflecting potential impacts of climate change on energy resources in its planning and operations.

40. Success in meeting the multiple challenges that the energy systems in the ECE region are facing, will require focused action by member States and an enhanced commitment to pursue the SDGs with strong political commitment, significantly higher financial resources, adequate regulatory frameworks and skilled human resources.

**(b) Second set of round tables***SDG 9: Green, sustainable and resilient infrastructure & transformative innovation*

41. Altogether, emissions associated with infrastructure assets, including embodied carbon in new construction, make up for 60 per cent of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. While decarbonization of infrastructure has progressed over the past decade, it still has a long way to go to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement. In the transport sector, rising demand for motorized mobility has outweighed improvements in fuel efficiency, modal share, and electrification of the vehicle fleet.

42. Regarding the transport infrastructure construction sector, the industrial primary products steel and cement remain particularly challenging to decarbonize cost efficiently. Each is representing around 7-8 per cent of energy-related emissions globally. Reaching net-zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for these sectors will require reducing demand, as well as more and higher value recycling, greater investment into the development of innovative solutions for the manufacturing of materials and switching to clean energy sourcing and green fuels for primary production. Reducing the carbon footprint of transport infrastructure construction requires existing transport assets to be optimized for improved efficiency rather than expanding and/ or building new assets. It is thus imperative to develop a new value chain and market for clearly defined “low-carbon construction and manufacturing” products.

43. Since governments are the main clients for large-scale construction projects, a comprehensive reform of the public procurement system and capacity-building are required to incorporate green considerations. Sustainable public procurement or green procurement in large infrastructure projects can drive the reduction of carbon emissions and the innovation of environment friendly products and services.

44. While being a net contributor to carbon emissions, the transport sector is also vulnerable to the effects of climate change, given that its infrastructure is increasingly impacted by extreme weather events, increasing temperatures and rising sea levels. They can cause both physical damage to the infrastructure, resulting in expensive reconstruction costs, and socio-economic losses from increased travel time, reduced availability or safety levels of infrastructure. As a first step of a coordinated adaptation process, governments should put in place systematic risk, vulnerability and criticality assessments of transport assets, aimed at identifying “hot spots” which require an implementation of an effective intervention programme to be resilient. Overall, given the increasing urgency to adapt to climate change, international cooperation on adaptation of transport infrastructure needs to be encouraged, for instance through the actions of the UNECE group of experts on Assessment of Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation for Inland Transport.

45. The international regulatory framework surrounding vehicles, managed through the World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations, plays a leading role in making vehicles greener and more sustainable. Regulations on vehicle emissions and recommendations on fuel quality as well as on safety for battery electric and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, including durability requirements for vehicle traction batteries, have been issued and are being used worldwide by governments and industry. At the same time, the ECE Working Party on Pollution and Energy, recognizing that a reduced carbon footprint of vehicles requires a “whole life cycle” approach endeavors to have a harmonized vehicle carbon footprint measurement procedure ready by 2025. Ultimately, using greener fuels and energy sources and recycling or re-using/repurposing resources during the manufacturing process should lead to a decarbonization of the entire sourcing and production process.

46. Finally, it should be recognized that transport infrastructure development, including in support of modal shift, plays an important part in promoting low carbon transport. Inter alia, transport policies should be used to shape travel demand and mobility patterns, and governments should deploy incentives and disincentives (fiscal and others) to reward decarbonization initiatives and prioritize investment in greener modes such as railways or zero-emission public transport and active mobility (walking and cycling). To drive innovation, energy conversion efficiency and switch to renewable energy carriers must be promoted through CO<sub>2</sub>-pricing, and more effective coordination/communication should be established between vehicles, the infrastructure on which they are operating (including charging/ refuelling infrastructure) and the broader energy supply ecosystem, ensuring that supply and demand remain in balance.

47. The starting point of the second part of the round table, dealing with transformative innovation, was that incremental changes to consumption and production patterns are insufficient for the UNECE region to attain the SDGs by 2030. To accelerate progress, there is an urgent need to transform entire socio-economic systems. This will require complementary innovations across different fields that cumulatively create a transformative effect on economic and ecological sustainability.

48. Many solutions to this end already exist, while others still need to be developed. For instance, the built environment is responsible for about one third of carbon emissions. Recent innovations in design, insulation and construction materials, energy generation, heating and cooling systems, lighting, and smart building management have made it possible to construct buildings with net-zero carbon emissions. However, according to the World Resources Institute, only one percent of the world's buildings currently meet this standard. Much more innovation is therefore needed to bring down the costs of constructing net zero buildings and of retrofitting existing buildings.

49. The same can be said for other key socio-economic systems, such as energy generation and distribution, transport, industry, or cities: it is possible to make them sustainable, but accelerated innovation is required in order to get there fast enough. Ultimately, these innovations, in new, more sustainable products, services, production processes and business models, will be developed in universities and company R&D labs, and the decisions how much to invest in them and how rapidly to deploy them will be made by businesses and consumers across the ECE region.

50. The challenge is that the commercial viability of one innovation, and hence the incentive to invest in it, often depends on simultaneous progress in other areas. For instance, the viability of hydrogen-powered jet engines depends on simultaneous progress in the process of producing clean hydrogen, and in the storage and refuelling infrastructure of airports.

51. Governments therefore need to cooperate with civil society and the business community to build consensus on the overall direction of innovation efforts in order to reduce the risks for innovators of failing due to the absence of progress in complementary areas. Governments also need to review and adjust regulations and other policies to align private incentives with the overall direction of the innovation effort. Rather than incentivizing individual innovations, it will be important for policy to catalyze the development of innovation eco-systems and of knowledge and innovation communities of practice to coordinate complementary innovations that cumulatively move the needle on the sustainability of a sector or a place.

52. An innovation-oriented approach to policy making itself is required, emphasizing foresight exercises to identify medium-term opportunities and threats, agility in responding quickly to lessons learned, and experimentation in regulatory test beds before scaling up policies.

53. Against this background, the round table called upon decision-makers in the ECE region to take the lead on developing new partnerships between governments, businesses and civil society to build international consensus on performance targets and timelines, and on the regulations, standards and other supporting policies, including for example financing and infrastructure, that are needed to catalyze truly transformative innovation.

*SDG 11: Cities leading the transformation: SDGs in action and the new multilateralism*

54. Cities are facing multiple challenges. These include, among others, the consequences of climate change, the implication of biodiversity loss, air pollution, waste management, increasing and ageing populations and migration. Insufficient financing constrains the ability to address these challenges effectively.

55. Despite these difficulties, cities are striving to make progress in the implementation of SDG 11 and other urban-related targets. Multiple initiatives have been undertaken to address the negative consequences of the pandemic and climate change, aiming to strengthen cities' resilience and putting in place SDGs plans. Key concerns are the increased resilience

to natural and man-made disasters, development of sustainable urban transport, creating vibrant public spaces, shaping nature-based solutions and offering affordable and adequate housing. Sustainable and resilient urban planning underpin these efforts.

56. The city of London, United Kingdom, responded to the need for increased resilience by developing its 2019 Urban Resilience Strategy. Human-made and natural disasters prompt the need for strong actions to redress the devastation caused. The recent earthquake in Syria and Türkiye had a catastrophic impact, which required a strong emergency response. Civil society stressed the importance of strong society networks to address these problems. To support the reconstruction efforts in cities and other human settlements, the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine has elaborated a draft framework for Plans for the Integrated Rehabilitation of Settlements (Territories). One of the pilot projects described in this context is the development of a Master Plan for the city of Mykolaiv.

57. Sustainable mobility was highlighted as another major challenge. Bonn, Germany, is addressing it through its 2019 Bonn Strategy, testing new mobility concepts in small neighbourhoods. Athens, Greece, in its 2021-2030 Action Plan is focussing on promoting active travel and restoring its pedestrian areas and increasing cycling.

58. Other cities are focussing their urban development plans around smartness and digitalization, including through the application of the latest technologies to make homes controllable remotely. Arkaduk, Turkmenistan, and Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, provided examples of this approach. Bishkek benefitted greatly from the UNECE Smart Sustainable City Profile to prepare for next steps, including the elaboration of the first voluntary local review.

59. Housing affordability is another challenge for many cities, as mentioned by Housing Europe. Slovenia has developed a National Housing Programme established through its Housing Law to improve housing affordability and accessibility. The urgent need for improving energy efficiency was recalled by Switzerland, where cities and Cantons promote renovation of buildings and the use of renewable energies. The lack of green areas is a common problem that undermines biodiversity. The production of food locally, as stated by FAO, can provide an answer to environmental and affordability problems. In Tirana, Albania, multiple initiatives have been developed to encourage food production, reduce food waste and promote related innovation.

60. Making cities more sustainable requires financial resources. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Italy is allocating 20.7 billion Euro to SDG 11 implementation; the Republic of Moldova is now allocating tax revenues to local authorities.

61. Large migratory flows are also a challenge for many cities in the region, In the Republic of Moldova, an ambitious agenda of integrating local development and migration flows is in place. Diaspora resources are blended with other funding to finance local projects.

62. Urban renewal plans have to be “anthropocentric” and respect the identity of cities. The policy problems posed by an ageing population and the specific difficulties faced by youth and other vulnerable segments of the population cannot be overlooked. Strategic considerations in urban planning regarding older persons in line with the principles of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing should be considered. Climate change is the main challenge all cities need to focus on in all their current and future plans.

63. Cities are playing an increasing role in international relations. In addition to city-to-city cooperation, this involves also collaboration with national governments and international organizations. This growing network of relations empowers cities' response to existing challenges, mainly through a knowledge exchange. Those linkages allow to jointly imagine and build together a sustainable future aligned with the 2030 Agenda. The UNECE Forum of Mayors, to be held in Geneva on 2-3 October, is an essential platform for mayors to exchange their best practices. It provides multiple possibilities for advocacy and dissemination. In particular, it facilitates linkages and a meaningful dialogue between the local and national dimensions.

64. The importance of cooperating through partnerships, alliances and city networks was highlighted. Examples of strategic collaborations included C40 and Eurocities. A particularly notable partnership recalled by Athens and Tirana, is the B40 Balkan Cities Network, which fosters successful alliances between cities in a sub-region where cooperation between countries has specific challenges.

65. Bonn, Germany and Bishkek, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Congress of Local Authorities underlined how important Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are as they help the city to communicate with citizens while showcasing action at the international level. The importance of VNRs to be supported by VLRs was also highlighted by many participants.

66. Madrid, Spain, and others also recalled the need to improve the dialogue between national and local authorities for a better alignment of policies and strategies. While approaches to development might differ at the national and local levels, local and national authorities should “follow the same road although in different cars”. Athens and the Geneva Cities Hub reiterated the importance of affording cities an international legal personality, for instance a specific ECOSOC status, so that they could participate in UN processes in their own capacity.

67. The round table concluded that cities have the agility, inventiveness and ingenuity to tackle situations that might seem unmanageable and make an important contribution to the implementation of the relevant SDGs. Cities are important political actors with transformational powers and are promoting a new form of multilateralism which is proving effective. To guarantee that future urban development is well-planned and equitable, cities and local administrations must have the necessary capacity and resources and be fully included in global efforts to meet the 2030 Agenda’s SDGs.

#### *SDG 9 & 17: Partnerships for inclusive and sustainable digital development*

68. Information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital development are key to ensure that the overall 2030 Agenda is realized. Partnerships across different stakeholders, sectors, countries and governance levels are necessary to ensure a prosperous digital development and avoid widening divides due to disparities in the speed of adoption of new technologies. The catalytic role of the UN system in supporting digital development at the national, regional and global levels is critical. Instruments like the UN Digital Development Toolbox and Digital Development Country Profiles may help in strengthening a One UN approach on digital matters.

69. Lack of resilient digital infrastructures and the rural-urban digital divide, including unequal school connectivity, remain a major challenge. Landlocked countries, in particular, struggle to provide internet connectivity. More investment in digital infrastructure together with adequate policies and regulations are needed to boost access to the internet. Broadband mapping systems are essential to provide knowledge on the reach and quality of digital networks and services. These systems allow regulators to assess market competition and gaps in coverage requiring funding, while facilitating the selection of service providers by citizens. Affordability of internet access and devices are an important policy concern. The Partner2Connect initiative, established in close cooperation with the UN Tech Envoy Office, provides a platform to catalyze investment and to harness partnerships for sustainable and inclusive digital development, acting at large scale and with impact on the ground.

70. With the growth of the information society, countries aspire to become innovation-driven digital economies but often lack human and institutional capabilities to integrate ICT innovation. Initiatives such as the ITU Innovation and Entrepreneurship Alliance for Digital Development can support bridging those gaps. The ICT sector is particularly reliant on innovation. Yet, lack of access to finance for enterprises, in particular SMEs, limits the ability of businesses to invest in new technologies and innovate, thus hindering competitiveness. Access to finance, grants and voucher systems at all stages of business development can effectively support the development of ICT sectors.

71. Digital government services are a prerequisite for a successful roll out of digital transformation. They are essential for delivering efficient and effective public services to citizens. To provide digital public services, it is essential to develop a resilient e-government



ecosystem. Providing digitization as a service through a front-office digitalization platform to service providers is an effective way to digitize public services in a quick, standardized, cost-effective, and scalable manner. Adopting the perspective of users when designing services and providing services into local languages is needed to ensure inclusive and accessible services.

72. Digital development should be human-centered, in particular considering new and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence. Special attention should be paid to the nexus between human rights, good governance and new technologies. Institutions often lack capacities to provide adequate safeguards to address new risks and undesirable impacts brought by such technologies, such as negative social norms, data privacy breaches, cyber harassment and bullying, among others. Countries should establish normative frameworks and update existing legislation to provide safety against these impacts.

73. Digital tools and services should by design address the needs of all women and girls. Gender should be mainstreamed in digital policies to remove barriers to equal access. Stakeholders need to foster a policy of zero tolerance for online gender-based violence occurring through or amplified using technology. Both public and private sector entities should prioritize prevention and elimination. Overall, the Commission on the Status of Women recommendations should be translated into actions.

74. Civil society is concerned by the digital restrictions such as blocking and restricting access to information resources and recommend developing a Digital Bill of Rights in consultation with civil society organizations. Renewed efforts are needed to build digital literacy and digital skills, particularly among older people and vulnerable groups, including on data protection and privacy. This is necessary to build trust and confidence, minimize the negative impact or misuse of disinformation and promote digital inclusion. New technologies are also pivotal to strengthen democratic institutions, improve transparency, accountability, civic participation and decentralization. They can also lower access barriers and reduce inequalities.

75. Digital development should be environmentally sound, socially trusted, and economically prosperous. The ICT sector must continue to become more circular and sustainable to tackle, among others, electronic waste, energy consumption, GHG emissions while being compatible with the Paris Agreement. As demand for earth metals such as graphite, lithium and cobalt is rising rapidly, effective policies and actions by governments are key to address the needs for critical raw materials while avoiding environmental and social harms to local communities.

76. Legislative measures should set criteria for green public procurement of ICTs. Standardization of digitalization, transparency and interoperability of data are essential. Investment in tools to measure and disclose the environmental and carbon footprint of technologies is required. Authorities often lack skills to use analytical tools to predict the cost and dynamics of the circular and low-carbon digital transition. Data collection and storage are needed to support decision-making processes. Collaboration between environmental and ICT regulatory authorities is fundamental. They hold the complementary technical knowledge required to assess the entire lifecycle of digital devices to make precise measurements and projections.

77. Space data (including satellite imagery), Internet of Things and other new and emerging technologies help tracking biodiversity, implement climate mitigation and adaptation measures and provide more accurate forecasts of extreme weather events. Early Warning Systems, using a combination of radar, satellite, and weather station data, with the help of supercomputers and forecast models encompassing latest scientific advances deliver early warnings to extreme weather events and protect populations, including in humanitarian crisis contexts. The Early Warning for All initiative can support countries in deploying such systems. Space data also support greener transportation systems through enabling autonomous automobiles. Energy consumption can be reduced by providing real-time data on traffic and road conditions while ensuring that automobiles are interconnected, including in areas without ground infrastructure.

## **Plenary session: Halfway towards 2030 – accelerating transformations to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the Economic Commission for Europe region.**

78. While the progress achieved so far in advancing the 2030 Agenda is insufficient, the scientific evidence presented in the forthcoming 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report shows that transformation is possible and can be shaped in a way that safeguards and enhances sustainable development. SDGs offer more positive than negative interlinkages, thus facilitating interventions for transformative change. Context-specific analysis is required to shape appropriate policies.

79. Transformation is a process, which requires different types of actions at different stages. Nurturing innovation and provision of strategic direction by governments are important levers in this transformation process. The ability to address trade-offs or goal conflicts is critical, which may require building the necessary capacities. Managing interlinkages through the various stages of this process is essential, including with the support provided by scientific advice.

80. Suitable institutional frameworks are required to underpin transformation, which is ultimately driven by political willingness. Policy coherence is ensured by whole-of-government approach which is complemented by a whole-of-society engagement. Promoting education and appropriate skills among civil servants is a sound investment that adds to the effectiveness of interventions, as promoted in Romania. In dealing with the interlinkages of SDGs in an interconnected world, partnerships and dialogue are critical to drive transformation.

81. The green transition is a major transformational goal, which in Serbia has led to multiple initiatives in different areas, including waste management, the circular economy and air pollution. Legal and regulatory changes are being accompanied by infrastructure development. A sustainable, circular and carbon-neutral economy requires boosting investment, knowledge, skills, innovation, technologies and partnerships. Subregional cooperation, including with the support of the UN, can contribute to open new opportunities to advance sustainable development.

82. The financial sector is one of the most important levers in driving the transformation towards sustainable development. Investment funds are increasingly allocated in line with sustainability considerations. Financial actors can also engage with companies to influence their business practices. Sustainability criteria are being reflected on the assessment of risks and the valuation of companies, thus providing an increasingly useful guide for lending decisions. Regulatory changes and the development of standards, including the EU taxonomy, are broadening the scope for the consideration of sustainability in the allocation of resources. The financial sector can be a catalyst for change through initiatives that promote collaboration among stakeholders, research and advocacy. The scale and complexity of the sustainable transition requires “building bridges” between multiple stakeholders in the finance, government, and international development communities.

83. Far-reaching transformative initiatives are taking place in various countries. In the United States, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Acts and the Inflation Reduction Act will be funding massive investments in decarbonizing the energy supply, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and building sustainable and resilient infrastructure. In the EU, the Green Deal Industrial Plan rests on four pillars (regulatory environment, financing, skills and trade) to advance clean tech and innovation on the road to net zero. Climate change is seen as an opportunity to increase competitiveness. This will require strengthening cooperation at various levels, including as part of ECE work.

84. Looking back, civil society drew attention to inequitable responses to the recent crises and the fact that the situation in the Global South was already precarious before the latest shocks. While the awareness on sustainability has increased, financial allocations and existing plans fall well short of what is required. There is a need for debt cancellation strategies and to provide appropriate financing for a SDG stimulus package that reaches all, in particular those who are at risk of exclusion. The burden of unpaid work of women should no longer be considered as a free resource. Planetary and environmental boundaries should be respected. All forms of discrimination should come to an end and the attempts to restrict

the role of civil society in some countries should stop. Civil society should be engaged not only on the development of VNRs but on the actions that should follow for the implementation of SDGs, including through social dialogue.

85. The youth representative urged the need to combat stigma and discrimination, to ensure equal access to all services and bridge existing divides. Persecution of youth activists must stop. Internships should be fairly paid, and all people given meaningful opportunities for decent work. Young people should be involved in VNR processes and be a source of accountability. Investing in young people is investing in the future.

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