

2024 UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

FAO STATEMENTS

Provisional agenda

1. Opening and adoption of the agenda.

2. High-level Policy Segment **“Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the UNECE region in times of multiple crises: The effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions”**.

Seven years are left to achieve the SDG 2 goals of ending hunger, food insecurity and all forms of malnutrition by 2030. The UNECE region is not on track to achieve hunger and food security targets in view of serious challenges experienced in the past couple of years. In 2021-23, food security and nutrition throughout the world and in the UNECE region were challenged by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine alongside adverse weather events stemming from climate change and other natural hazards.

While the shocks have adversely affected efforts to end hunger and improve food security and nutrition, the FAO most recent estimates generally reveal a low prevalence of hunger and food insecurity in the UNECE region compared to the world average.

This 2023 edition of the Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) shows that the average cost of a healthy diet has increased in the ECA region and almost all its subregions because of rising inflation. Nevertheless, the number of people who cannot afford a healthy diet has declined by 25.7 million.

While UNECE countries are working to achieve the SDGs, the promotion of healthy diets has been challenging. This would require an agrifood system transformation that places the repurposing of food and agricultural policies at the centre of addressing challenges related to food security, nutrition and health; the livelihoods of farmers and others connected to the agriculture sector; and environmental sustainability.

Sustainable, resilient, inclusive and efficient agrifood systems that support and promote affordable healthy diets for all require adequate policy options and close collaboration and coordination among multiple sectors within and outside of agrifood systems to accelerate progress towards achieving the SDG 2 goal of a hunger-free, food-secure and healthy Europe and Central Asia. The development of food system based dietary guidelines, that include recommendations for consumers, food and nutrition professionals and policymakers is a crucial tool to improve evidence-based planning and coordination.

Sources: [Europe and Central Asia - Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023 \(fao.org\)](#)
[The future of food systems in Europe and Central Asia - 2022–2025 and beyond \(fao.org\)](#)

3. Peer learning round tables:

Sustainable Development Goal 1 – No Poverty:

In the UNECE region, the agricultural sector holds immense significance for the well-being and livelihoods of its people. Despite progress, around 80 million people in Europe and Central Asia still live in multidimensional poverty on less than USD 5 per day, with rural poverty showing a slower decline compared to urban areas.

The high incidence of migration from rural to urban areas and abroad in many countries, particularly in Central Asia, has both positive and negative aspects. Outmigration from rural areas is part of the process of structural transformation of economies in which the importance of agriculture for income and employment generation declines relative to other sectors. However, rural–urban migration not being supported by income generation in urban areas can lead to the growth of urban poverty and food insecurity. At the same time, such migration leads to the depopulation and degradation of rural areas and a shift in the demographic structure. Young people unable to find decent employment and leaving rural areas means that rural populations are aging, losing dynamism and innovativeness. Youth unemployment rates vary across the region but are among the world’s highest in Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, at 38.2 percent, 33.8 percent and 45.5 percent, respectively.

The imperative to leave no one behind, underscores the importance of addressing poverty and inequality, especially among the most marginalized communities. In the context of agrifood systems, this entails recognizing and supporting vulnerable groups such as women, children, and people with disabilities, who often face significant barriers to accessing productive resources and markets.

Addressing the challenges faced by smallholder farmers and marginalized community in the UNECE region requires a multifaceted approach that integrates climate resilience, gender equality, and inclusive economic development. The improvement of the sustainability of urban food systems would also contribute to well-being and livelihoods of a growing urban population. By prioritizing investments in agricultural innovation, infrastructure, and social protection programs, we can build a more sustainable and equitable future for all, ensuring that no one is left behind in the transition towards resilient agrifood systems.

Source: [Guidelines on integrating the “leave no one behind” principle into development planning in Europe and Central Asia \(fao.org\)](#)

[The future of food systems in Europe and Central Asia - 2022–2025 and beyond \(fao.org\)](#)

Sustainable Development Goal 13 – Climate Action:

In the ongoing quest for sustainable development and food security, the nexus of climate change and gender equality emerges as a pivotal focal point, especially within the agricultural landscapes of Europe and Central Asia. As we confront the challenges posed by a changing climate, it becomes increasingly apparent that gender disparities intersect with environmental and climate vulnerabilities, influencing the resilience and welfare of communities.

Women are disproportionately impacted by climate change in Europe and Central Asia due to their unique social, economic, and cultural roles compared to men although women have a significant role in building community resilience and adaptation to climate change.

The updated FAO Strategy on Climate Change (2022) and its global and regional action plan prioritizes the mainstreaming of gender equality, youth engagement, Indigenous Peoples' participation and social inclusiveness.

Despite large data gaps in Europe and Central Asia which makes it difficult to assess gender disparities, Brief Overview of Regional Trends and Challenges prepared based the Country Gender Assessments (CGAs) prepared by FAO (2022) provide evidence of the ways in which gender disparities in rural areas constrain women's ability to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. The following are key examples from the CGAs that elaborate on gender disparities in climate change mitigation and adaptation:

- Women have less access to agricultural inputs which are critical for the promotion and introduction of climate-resilient agriculture practices and technologies.
- Across the region, women are underrepresented in farmers' organizations, especially in managerial roles (FAO, 2022). This limits their access to emerging technologies, extension services and climate information (FAO, 2019).
- Social norms play critical roles in climate-related natural disasters as well.

The actions entails: (i) realizing women's pivotal role in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction action; (ii) empowering women in accessing land, agricultural extension and other related services in the value chain, machinery and frontier agricultural practices; and (iii) improving women's presence in decision-making including in income and finances.

These aspects are interrelated and cyclical, reinforcing each other's impact. Gender mainstreaming initiatives in climate finance interventions in support the transformation of food systems serve as catalysts for progress within this virtuous cycle, rather than standalone actions with limited long-term effects.

By recognizing and addressing these challenges, we can work towards more inclusive and effective climate action in the UNECE region.

Source: [Gender mainstreaming in climate investments in the agriculture, forestry and other land use sector in Europe and Central Asia \(fao.org\)](#)

Sustainable Development Goal 16 – Peace, Justice and Institutions:

As we strive for sustainable development and societal resilience in the UNECE region, it is paramount to focus on SDG 16 and its pivotal role in fostering peaceful and inclusive societies, despite the challenges we face in achieving its targets, particularly amidst democratic erosion, protracted conflicts, and socio-economic disparities.

In response to these challenges, it is essential to identify effective partnerships, policies, and development interventions that can safeguard and enhance the gains made towards SDG 16.

Amidst ongoing polycrises institutional innovations and policies, including digital technologies, have demonstrated their capacity to drive strategic reforms and reduce inequalities within our societies.

By enhancing transparency, public service delivery, and governance models, these innovations contribute to the accelerated achievement of SDG 16, particularly at the local level.

To ensure robust mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and participation, governments must also collaborate with civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders in order to foster inclusive partnerships grounded in rights-based digital transformations, with the aim of strengthening democratic governance and advance the agenda of SDG 16, even amidst shifting political environments.

Moreover, regional cooperation is vital for achieving shared goals related to food systems transformation, sustainable water management, and the empowerment of small-scale producers.

In the pursuit of peaceful, democratic, digitally equipped, and people-centered societies, innovative ideas must be generated to address tipping points that could lead to fragile imbalances and conflict risks. By reinforcing foundations of democratic resilience and societal cohesion, we can navigate complexities and chart a course towards a more equitable and prosperous future for all in the UNECE region.

Source: [Policy analysis of Nationally Determined Contributions in the Europe and Central Asia region \(fao.org\)](#)

[Outcomes of the United Nations Food Systems Summit in Europe and Central Asia \(fao.org\)](#)

Sessions around Sustainable Development Goal 2 – Zero Hunger:

The 2023 Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia highlights the region's progress towards SDG 2 amidst recent challenges as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical shocks.

Population growth, urbanization, and changing food preferences strain food systems, while climate change and weak policy choices, especially post-COVID-19, exacerbate the complexity of the regional context.

The prevalence of undernourishment in the region has been below 2.5 percent since 2000, with notable declines in food insecurity, but around 111.1 million people (11.9 percent of the population of the ECA region) were estimated to be moderately or severely food insecure in 2022, highlighting persistent challenges.

While progress has been made in reducing stunting and wasting among children, other nutritional challenges include anaemia among women, prevalence of under-five children overweight and rising rates of adult obesity, reflect diverse dietary issues.

There is a need for more coordinated action between health and agrifood sectors to address the growing number of diet-related non-communicable diseases by providing an enabling food environment, where sustainable healthy diets are more available and affordable.

To assure a healthy diet for all, the quality and safety of food needs continuous efforts by food companies, and food safety authorities. Consumers ability to make healthy food choices is informed by the 'food environment' where food labelling, advertising and markets, retail structure and markets are all influencing factors. Education and food literacy programmes can inform consumers and empower them on healthy food choices, and on the agrifood systems they desire.

On the other hand, there is a persistent issue of food loss and waste occurring across various stages of production and consumption, which has detrimental effects on food security, resource utilization and environmental sustainability, exacerbating pressures on natural resources and contributes to unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions.

One of the most precious resources we have in our hands are the so-called “smart” solutions. Modern food systems are entering a fundamentally new stage of technological development, as digitalization is seen as a key enabler of agricultural and rural development through improved information and communication processes, but this is not enough.

The European Union and the governments in the wider UNECE Region have the influence to persuade the markets to produce quality, safe food in a more environmentally friendly way, as agri-food products produced in unsustainable ways will inevitably fail to meet the SDG 2 targets.

As we navigate the challenges ahead, strong political will and collective action are paramount to support governments and other stakeholders, at national and local level, in their efforts to accelerate progress towards a hunger-free, food-secure, and healthy Europe and Central Asia. Together, we can ensure that no one is left behind in our pursuit of sustainable food security and nutrition for all.

Source: [Europe and Central Asia - Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023 \(fao.org\)](#)

Sustainable Development Goal 17 – Partnership for the Goals

In the context of SDG 17, which emphasizes the importance of building effective partnerships for sustainable development, it is vital to recognize innovation as a key priority in national agricultural development programs.

Despite recognizing the advantages that innovation brings, such as increased competitiveness and reduced costs, its adoption has been inconsistent and hesitant. Barriers to effective innovation systems include financial constraints, especially for small holders and family farms as well as small and medium-sized enterprises, where investments are perceived as costly and risky, and return on investment is difficult to gauge.

Addressing these barriers requires multifaceted approaches. At the farm level, attitudes toward innovation need to be cultivated, and access to finance and relevant training must be improved. Nationally, policies should actively encourage and support innovation, including through financing mechanisms.

Moreover, successful implementation of innovation policies necessitates investments in education and capacity development to enhance human capital and foster a culture of innovation. Strengthening research and development capacities, building appropriate infrastructure, and promoting collaboration among businesses, science, and education are also crucial to generate practical and affordable technologies.

Digital technologies are increasingly recognized as indispensable tools for agricultural development, offering real-time information, improving product quality, reducing environmental impacts and

enhancing environmental sustainability. However, challenges persist, including limited broadband infrastructure in rural areas and affordability issues, particularly for smallholders. Bridging the "digital divide" requires not only infrastructure investment but also raising awareness among farmers about the benefits of digital technologies and ensuring the relevance of digital services to their needs.

In line with SDG 17, effective partnerships between governments, international organizations, private sector entities, academia and civil society are essential for driving digital transformation in agriculture. We need to be ready to collaborate with stakeholders in the UNECE region to facilitate knowledge exchange, mobilize resources, and support the adoption of digital solutions tailored to the region's agricultural context, thereby contributing to sustainable development and food security goals.

Source: [The future of food systems in Europe and Central Asia - 2022–2025 and beyond \(fao.org\)](#)

4. Advancing key transitions and cooperation towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the UNECE region

The UNECE region stands at a critical juncture in its journey towards sustainable development. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, it is imperative that we prioritize concerted efforts to advance key transitions and foster cooperation to achieve the SDGs set forth by the international community.

The region encompasses a diverse array of countries spanning from Western Europe to Central Asia, each facing unique challenges and opportunities on their path to sustainability.

At the heart of our collective endeavor lies the commitment to promoting sustainable agriculture, ensuring food security, and combating hunger. Agriculture remains a cornerstone of the UNECE region's economy, providing livelihoods for millions of people while also serving as a custodian of natural resources. However, the sector faces formidable challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and demographic shifts, which necessitate innovative approaches and transformative actions.

One of the key transitions crucial for achieving the SDGs in the UNECE region is the shift towards more sustainable production and consumption patterns. This entails promoting agroecological practices, reducing food loss and waste, and fostering the adoption of sustainable technologies across the entire food value chain. By embracing circular economy principles and promoting responsible consumption, we can minimize environmental degradation and enhance the resilience of food systems.

Furthermore, achieving the SDGs requires a holistic approach that addresses the interlinkages between food security, poverty eradication, health, and environmental sustainability.

By forging partnerships among governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector, we can harness collective expertise and resources to drive meaningful change at the regional and national levels. By investing in rural development, improving access to markets and financial services, and strengthening social protection systems, we can create enabling environments for inclusive and sustainable growth. By working together with determination and solidarity, we can build a future where food security is assured, natural resources are preserved, and prosperity is shared by all.

Source: [The future of food systems in Europe and Central Asia - 2022–2025 and beyond \(fao.org\)](#)