



UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development
Plenary Session & Closing

14 Mar 2024, Geneva

After our recent discussions at this Forum and your personal experience, can we still be optimistic regarding sustainable development prospects? Are you optimistic? (1 Minute)

- As it stands, hearing the interventions, examples and statistics presented yesterday in the plenary and the roundtables, we are very far from being in a good place to achieve the SDGs by 2030.
- We are optimistic that we in civil society have energy and commitment to support implementation of the SDGs.
- But despite numerous calls for multi-stakeholders engagement, **we do not have clear signals from governments and other stakeholders that we can be meaningfully included in the very hard work ahead** - coping with the effects of conflict and climate damage, the impact of the pandemic, increased inequalities within and between countries, rising poverty and exclusion of already marginalised people due to their age, ethnicity, gender, disability, nationality, refugee status and location.
- We see human rights challenges and violence all around, including towards ourselves.
- Our space for action and engagement in some countries is closing.
- We have **less than 6 years**, so if we see drastic change after this forum at national level, then we will be optimistic.

Leaving no one behind is a core aspiration of the 2030 Agenda. How can we shape the key transformations necessary for the Summit of the Future and full SDG achievement to meet this aspiration? How can civil society be meaningfully included as full partners to ensure we move at speed in the right direction? (5 MINUTES)

Dear distinguished delegates,

I am speaking on behalf of the Regional **Civil Society** Engagement Mechanism for the UNECE region.

This is how we see civil society can ensure we move at speed in the right direction

- **In terms of principles**, we embed gender equality, combat discrimination due to age, gender, disability, ethnicity and nationality, guarantee participative processes which includes action to protect nature and include our voice for current and future generations as the accepted approach to climate justice; that act to prevent climate and human rights disinformation;
- **In policy terms and our actions we can shift** the balance of current economic priorities and systems into one which is focused on the **wellbeing** of people and the planet, which is built on human rights frameworks including International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Policies must tackle inequalities within and between countries and recognize the value of unpaid care work, the need for investment to end poverty with universal social protection, reformation of governance systems. Member States should prioritise genuine social dialogue to guarantee decent working conditions for all, that embeds human activities into planetary boundaries. Member States must uphold the rule of law and invest in extending social protection sector and a fair and just care sector; life long education including on sustainable development.

But we **can't** achieve it without governments **stepping up**, so in terms of actions we call on Member States for:

- Transparency, accountability, responsibility, keeping up on innovations but to lessen the digital divide/gap between people and locations.
- Adherence and compliance with national laws as well as international conventions and obligations - full policy coherence.
- CSO inclusion beyond forms of consultation by investing in our capacity to participate even more effectively. By providing resources, technical assistance and a seat at the table to meaningfully engage in policy discussions, advocacy, and implementation. Ensure timely and accessible information for transparent and accountable participation. Also, be adaptive and responsive to the changing needs due to shocks and emerging issues and priorities of civil society organisations. Member States should not be gatekeepers and make special visa waivers available for those who couldn't join us here today and are looking forward to the HLPF and Summit of the Future. This will mean investing into the ecosystem of horizontal democracies and opening the door of the rooms where decisions are taken.
- Member states should consult with civil society on how to tackle the backlash on climate action, gender equality, and closing civic space, and rise right wing movements and their harmful narratives.
- To desist and veto any so-called Laws on Foreign Agents, which restrict the activities of civil society and contradict international standards.
- We urge to eliminate the practice of political persecution for peaceful activities across the region and immediate release of Trade Union activists, environmental and human rights defenders as well as political prisoners. In certain countries in our region, the number of political prisoners continues to rise, many of whom are women. Political prisoners are held in torturous conditions, without access to medical care and basic necessities. In many cases, their release is a matter of life and death. Thus we suggest establishing formal obligations for all UN bodies, UN programs, and UN Member States (for bilateral and multilateral agreements) to consider the release of political prisoners as a prerequisite for investments, financial and other international support.

Additionally, we call for solidarity and humanitarian aid for countries experiencing armed conflicts. **We demand permanent ceasefires NOW.** We demand that Member States in our region reinstate funding to UNRWA, and to divest from the military sector. **We need peace, not more war and death.**

Let us work together! We refuse to accept that our colleagues are imprisoned or pushed out of their home countries for the work they do for YOU, and for everyone. It's time to acknowledge that freedom drives innovation and ignites progress.

Thank you.