

Opening Statement of the Youth (Major Group of Children and Youth)

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2024

Your Excellencies, Esteemed colleagues of the Civil Society, Fellow Youth, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am Cristina Arnes Sanz from Spain, and I am here today to speak on behalf of the Major Group of Children and Youth.

Since the beginning of this year, we have brought together young people from across the ECE region virtually and in person to explore our different sub-regional priorities, review SDG progress, and strategize around our engagement in the upcoming Summit of the Future. Today, we are happy to share our collective concerns and demands on the SDGs under review.

We want to start by recognising the importance of the ECE region in advancing right-based sustainable development. Within our region, we are grappling with increasing geopolitical tensions, the impact of climate change, and exacerbating inequalities. The 2030 Agenda is not an agenda for some, it is an agenda for all, and we will not reach it while many in our communities are still marginalized. We must center social, economic, environmental and intergenerational justice to deliver the world we need.

We must also acknowledge our region's responsibility towards the Global South - and the people who live with the legacies of our actions and inactions. Countries in our region must take an active role in reshaping more equitable global economic systems, addressing debt justice, and taking action to protect and uphold the rights of migrants and indigenous peoples, and other frontline communities who are living with the effects of our region's unsustainable consumption and production.

Today, we share our recommendations on the SDGs under review:

For SDG 1, we call for targeted investments in education to tackle poverty. Recognising the inequalities in economic systems which affect the most vulnerable, we insist on reforming the global financial architecture, strengthening social protection floors across our region, establishing a multidimensional vulnerability index, and developing spaces for youth and civil society to engage in shaping person-centered economic policy. We request the training of our teachers and healthcare professionals to properly address the impacts of poverty on young people and support initiatives such as the provision of subsidised essential products.

Regarding SDG2, we have identified challenges including food wastage, unjust trade practices and food inaccessibility, especially in the light of climate change. We must foster behavioral changes through education and youth-led campaigns, thus providing awareness of the necessity of mindful portioning. We also require specialized funding solutions and technical support to grassroot communities affected by food crises and conflict.

For SDG13, young people demand climate justice and we must recognise their role in leading climate action within our region and beyond. We call on member states to deliver on their commitments, strengthen intergenerational and gender-equitable climate governance, adopt healthy transport adaptation plans and involve youth in early warning initiatives. We urge you to invest in ecosystem protection, support regenerative practices, and create inclusive spaces for youth-led accountability on climate action at all levels.

On SDG 16, young people are leading peace-building initiatives, yet, we often face barriers in participating in political arenas, especially in conflict zones. We call on governments to protect and champion the freedoms of speech and peaceful protest, and strengthen appropriate laws that protect the youth. We call on all ECE member states to take responsibility and stop the ongoing devastating conflicts and wars in our region by using diplomatic channels. We also call on the United Nations to equally guide and nurture young leaders in diplomacy, democracy, and the rule of law, ensuring our voices resonate throughout decision-making processes.

Regarding SDG 17, we recognize the power of partnerships in reaching the SDGs, while innovation and investments are essential for progress, especially when it comes to the digital divide we live in. We call for a transparent approach to governance, urging governments to embrace progressive financing, guarantee fairly remunerated institutional internships and mentorships, and ensure access to essential documents through open digital channels and translations. We insist on the necessity of greater inclusion of youth and civil society on VNRs and in national policymaking.

Finally, we reinforce that we cannot achieve the SDGs in a world marked by conflict, violence and structural inequalities. This is not the world young people want, it is not the world we deserve to inherit. We call for a ceasefire, for an end to conflicts and wars within and beyond our region, and for the protection of human rights defenders who continue to put themselves at risk every day in the fight for a better world. A Pact for our Future, a Declaration for Future Generations, will mean nothing without peace and justice for all.