



## Youth Report for the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development on the SDGs under Review for 2024

The Youth of the ECE Region recognises the importance and responsibility of their region in advancing right-based sustainable development. Recent challenges the region faces, including increasing geopolitical tensions, the climate crisis, and exacerbating inequalities, have underscored the need for intersectoral and multi-stakeholder action. Young people, as recognised in the UN Youth Strategy, have a crucial role in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

This Youth Report presents a collective call for comprehensive, accelerated, and bold action, voicing the concerns and demands of young people of the ECE Region to governments, UN agencies, and civil society in the ECE region regarding the five SDGs under review for 2024.

### SDG 1

#### A. Current status of SDG implementation in the UNECE region

- *Education and learning:* Poor or segregated education leads to inadequate learning among those most affected by poverty, incomplete schooling, and dependency on governmental funding, thus contributing to the concentration and perpetuation of poverty.
- *Inequalities:* Disparities exist throughout governmental policies, resulting in the inequitable distribution of educational and financial resources, which do not sufficiently address the requirements of vulnerable populations that are most in need of governmental support. The youth advocate for more effective financial distribution mechanisms, community-building, and all-encompassing support in combating poverty.
- *Challenges:* The eradication of poverty is hindered by insufficient resources, limited funding and platforms for youth, lack of government proactiveness, and conflicting interests between the public and private sectors. Conversely, Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) should be utilised as an opportunity to achieve equitable, gender-oriented, and sustainable progress toward attaining SDG1.
- *Future of SDG 1:* The youth recognise the long journey in confronting poverty influenced by global market interdependence and intersectionality.
- *Challenges in the sub-regions:* The status quo leads to unacceptable economic and social inequalities affecting the most vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minority groups, migrants and refugees, and those living in rural areas. These communities face barriers including but not limited to high rates of unemployment, access to health services, large wage gaps, and hunger.

#### B. Recommendations to the governments of the UNECE region

- Prioritise representation for minority groups, ensuring inclusive, meaningful, and intersectional youth participation in policy discussions.
- Establish the beyond-GDP multidimensional vulnerability index called for by the UN Secretary-General to recognise the unique circumstances of countries affected by poverty, as well as develop national youth-specific indices such as a Youth Well-Being Index (YWBI).
- Invest in training teachers and healthcare professionals to identify and address the burdens of poverty on youth.
- Prioritise the provision of free essential healthcare, hygiene, anticonception, and childcare products to alleviate financial burdens on low-income families and close the social protection gap, benefiting also marginalised communities such as minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, and refugees.



- Support youth transitioning from learning to earning, through lowering taxes for youth-led start-ups and offering other forms of support, such as grants, loans, mentorship programs, and access to incubators and accelerators, to help alleviate some of the financial burdens the youth face associated with starting a business or self-employment.
- Act upon reforming the international financial architecture, especially to establish a supportive debt cancellation process that is central to alleviating poverty and to include adapted services as part of social protection, ensuring that financing is focused on the most vulnerable groups.
- Review and invest in resilient social protection systems to ensure efficient emergency preparedness and response.

### **C. Recommendations to the UN agencies in the UNECE region**

- Establish funding mechanisms, built on the model used for the Youth Assembly, toward supporting youth constituencies that engage young people of the ECE region affected by poverty.
- Ensure equitable participation of young people from communities discriminated by descent, race, ethnicity, disability status, sexual orientation, or the type of employment in decision-making processes, particularly youth from indigenous communities.
- Support capacity-building initiatives for youth at the local, sub-regional, and regional levels to engage in poverty alleviation.
- Encourage Member States to address the unique challenges of conflict-affected areas, ensuring that civilian living standards avoid poverty conditions.

### **D. Recommendations to the civil society in the UNECE region**

- Promote awareness and advocacy on poverty issues affecting the youth.
- Create learning and non-formal education programs, specifically focusing on developing green skills, to facilitate access to the job market for the most vulnerable youth.
- Support initiatives for equitable wealth distribution and access of youth to essential services.
- Engage in solidarity efforts to address the root causes of poverty and inequality.

## **SDG 2**

### **A. Current status of SDG implementation in the UNECE region**

- *Food Systems Challenges:* The youth identify the challenges in achieving SDG2 as a problem driven by inequity, highlighted by the fact that a large number of children, particularly those in conflict zones, are malnourished and hungry, while many others are suffering from obesity. To address this issue, some of the key challenges that need to be overcome are food insecurity, obstacles in food distribution, systematic inefficiencies, price instability, food waste, and technological limitations in our food systems, among others.
- *Interconnected Nature of SDG 2:* SDG 2 is tightly related to other goals, including poverty eradication, health promotion, education enhancement, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. The youth is particularly concerned by the impact of climate change on our food systems.
- *Concerns about Food Wastage:* The alarming levels of food wastage and lack of portion awareness among individuals are key concerns, considering the worrisome rates of malnutrition, food insecurity, and obesity.
- *Role of Stakeholders:* The youth are concerned by the trade practices of stakeholders who prioritise profit over accessibility to food, resulting in inflated food prices exacerbating food inaccessibility. They emphasise the significance of transparent and profit-free corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a valuable asset for all stakeholders involved in the food chain.



## **B. Recommendations to the governments of the UNECE region**

- Act immediately to ensure that food supplies reach areas affected by conflict without restriction and that humanitarian aid is delivered safely and consistently.
- Foster behavioural changes from a young age to promote healthy dieting, mindful portioning, and proper food storage practices, to foster better physical and mental health and reduce food waste.
- Implement guidelines, regulations, and laws to end food waste, particularly concerning supermarkets and restaurants, in line with SDG 12.3.
- Develop a comprehensive policy framework that includes robust monitoring systems, engages diverse professionals and stakeholders, and tackles systemic issues, including corruption.
- Provide financial support from institutions like the World Bank and FAO for specialised funding solutions led by grassroots communities tailored to advancing SDG 2 effectively.

## **C. Recommendations to the UN agencies in the UNECE region**

- Develop more synergies for processes between the UN Committee on World Food Security and the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub to mitigate information silos.
- Encourage a comprehensive policy framework for decision-making that covers all food systems and accounts for varying regional perspectives.
- Call for research and data-driven approaches, identifying and monitoring key development indicators to better understand the unique challenges and opportunities for achieving SDG2 in the UNECE region.
- Advocate for integrating climate resilience strategies into hunger eradication programs, recognising the interconnectedness of food security and environmental sustainability.

## **D. Recommendations to the civil society in the UNECE region**

- Promote educational programs, particularly for children and youth, targeting the importance of food waste reduction and sustainable food choices.
- Continue the efforts to raise awareness of good nutrition practices and healthy diet choices, especially for the most vulnerable groups, including children and pregnant women.
- Encourage collaboration between local communities, farmers, and governments to develop effective policies addressing food security, and advocate for sustainable agriculture practices that prioritise environmental conservation and long-term food security.
- Support initiatives that empower young small-scale farmers and ensure fair access to resources, markets, and technology.

# **SDG 13**

## **A. Current status of SDG implementation in the UNECE region**

- *Climate Negotiations:* Welcoming the COP28 decision regarding the long overdue transition away from fossil fuels, the youth urge bold action to accelerate global climate efforts, including the phase-out of fossil fuels in the COP29 negotiations.
- *Youth Engagement in Climate Action:* The youth emphasise the need to establish harmonised guiding principles for youth engagement, including implementation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure their meaningful participation in the climate space, especially given the mismatch between present programs, curricula, and the future workforce following the green transition.
- *Education, Learning, Public Awareness and Support:* Public awareness, climate formal, and non-formal education are essential comprehensive approaches that integrate climate education into



all levels and fields of the education system. Access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHSPS) services for young people facing rising rates of climate anxiety should be assured, particularly following extreme weather events and other climate-related disasters.

- *Capacity Building:* Leveraging industry opportunities and fostering collaborations with local governments and municipalities can be positive for climate change finance, planning, and management. Additionally, green skills are key enablers of the green transition and integration of youth into future professions.

#### **B. Recommendations to the governments of the UNECE region**

- Include independent youth delegates in national delegations at international climate events, selected transparently. This ensures their suitable mandate of representing the children and youth in their countries, uniting the voices of young activists and advocates, and propagating the outcomes within their communities.
- Adapt and extend the Youth2030 Scorecard systems to assess youth engagement in the work of public institutions, screen the climate legislation for sensitivity to the needs of young people and children, and engage young experts in Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) assessments.
- Ensure the inclusion of youth in the Early Warnings for All initiative as meaningful implementers of relevant activities, such as equitable data gatherers in local communities.
- Follow the COP28 Declaration on Climate and Health and translate commitments into action by prioritising the protection of vulnerable communities, especially children and youth, from the health impacts of climate change.
- Prioritise investments in nature-based solutions (NbS) tailored to country-specific needs, considering applicability, necessity, and the potential to protect and restore ecosystems.
- Adopt a Healthy Transportation Action Plan at the regional level, focusing on sustainable transportation promotion and unifying regulations based on the capacities of Member States.
- Integrate national military greenhouse gas emissions into annual greenhouse gas inventories and leverage this data to increase investments in mitigation measures, as well as to analyse the impact of such pollution on the environment and human health.

#### **C. Recommendations to the UN agencies in the UNECE region**

- Encourage Member States to proactively include independent youth delegates in national delegations at international climate events, selected transparently.
- Support youth capacity-building programmes to encourage the development of future leaders in the area of climate action, such as youth innovation challenges and hackathons to encourage international collaboration.
- Establish collaborative platforms across sectors and neighbouring countries to collectively pursue SDG 13 targets, fostering synergies and shared accountability.

#### **D. Recommendations to the civil society in the UNECE region**

- Support adolescents and youth through appropriate career guidance and mentorship (e.g., from sustainability experts) to foster their interest in sustainability and develop the green skills required when accessing the job market in the current green transition.
- Create mechanisms for intersectoral and intergenerational collaboration, such as citizens and scientists to collaboratively design and test solutions based on local knowledge and scientific evidence.



- Demand inclusion and openness from Member States during VNR developments, and create an opportunity for youth initiatives to develop shadow VNRs to assess and address issues or challenges overlooked during government reporting.
- Invest in protecting and restoring ecosystems, supporting regenerative agriculture and sustainable fishing practices, through the provision of volunteering opportunities and youth inclusion campaigns.

## SDG 16

### A. Current status of SDG implementation in the UNECE region

- *Youth Political Engagement:* Young people contribute to raising awareness by launching initiatives and global strikes, highlighting urgent matters.
- *Barriers to Expression:* The youth face unique and diverse difficulties in accessing political institutions and expressing their concerns in political agendas due to a lack of political will or inclusivity in decision-making processes, with varying degrees of obstacles to freedom of speech and repression across different countries in the UNECE region, depending on the political context and level of conflict in different sub-regions.
- *Challenges to Youth-Led Peacebuilding:* Youth activists, especially those in conflict areas, are vulnerable to dictatorships, autocracies, shrinking civil society space, systems of oppression, radical anti-democratic groups, and ideologies in the shape of misinformation, disinformation, and democratic backsliding.

### B. Recommendations to the governments of the UNECE region

- Stop all ongoing devastating conflicts and wars in our region by using diplomatic channels under the provisions of international law, securing human rights, supporting humanitarian and peace-building efforts in conflict-affected areas, and stopping the violence immediately.
- Uphold fundamental freedom of speech, press, artistic expression, association and assembly, as well as the right to peaceful protest. Importantly, strengthen the legal framework to safeguard the youth.
- Develop and establish a national and local Youth Well-Being Index (YWBI) that can be implemented at the national and municipal levels. The YWBI serves as an instrument of cooperation between governmental authorities, youth NGOs and young people, to measure the well-being of youth on the national and municipal level and to facilitate the implementation of evidence-based relevant youth policy, with the objective of making countries and cities more youth-friendly, inclusive and resilient to the specific ongoing challenges.
- Partner with Civil Society Organisations, including youth organisations, working with young people in conflict-affected areas to promote the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda, ensuring clear guidelines for collaboration and oversight mechanisms.
- Ensure equal and inclusive youth access to political institutions by encouraging intergenerational dialogue, providing effective and equitable financial support with robust monitoring mechanisms and evaluation framework for accountability and transparency, and fostering greater engagement of young people in decision-making processes at all levels of governance, including through youth advisory councils, participatory budgeting and youth-led policy forums.
- Ensure at a national level that subjects covering democracy, political institutions and mechanisms, and the rule of law are included in the education curricula, allowing young people to make informed and evidence-based independent decisions.
- Act toward reforming the UN Security Council to strengthen its ability to represent the people of the region and the world equitably and to enhance transparency and accountability mechanisms.



### **C. Recommendations to the UN agencies in the UNECE region**

- Support Member States in implementing National Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Strategies to facilitate meaningful youth engagement in national peacebuilding and security efforts.
- Ensure clearer and more widespread information regarding youth opportunities and involvement in decision-making processes, empowering access and engagement for youth representatives.
- Support platforms led by young advocates from across the ECE region, including non-governmental representatives from countries in a state of conflict and war, to discuss, understand, and propose solutions for ongoing conflicts, fostering a new generation of diplomatic leaders.
- Prioritise integrating peace and justice principles into national and international policy agendas, focusing on inclusive governance structures.

### **D. Recommendations to the civil society in the UNECE region**

- Invest in capacity-building initiatives to empower vulnerable communities and youth organisations to contribute effectively to the implementation of SDG 16.
- Encourage young legal enthusiasts to collaborate with organisations specialised in international law, and war crimes documentation and prosecution.
- Support young artists, historians, and cultural enthusiasts in projects to protect endangered cultural sites and artefacts.

## **SDG 17**

### **A. Current status of SDG implementation in the UNECE region**

- *Multi-stakeholder Partnerships:* The youth recognise the key role of multi-stakeholder dialogue and partnerships in achieving the SDGs, with a need for more effective involvement of civil society and trade unions.
- *Data and Statistics:* The youth emphasise the importance of inclusive and disaggregated data and statistics that cover diverse factors, such as age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual orientation, to combat insufficient, non-transparent, and manipulated data-gathering practices.

### **B. Recommendations to the governments of the UNECE region**

- Increase transparency, consultation, social dialogue inclusive of gender and governance based on public participation and ownership.
- Invest in data collection and monitoring systems to facilitate effective evidence-based interventions, improving the availability and comparability of intersectional statistical data for comprehensive analysis of progress on the SDGs.
- Facilitate the translation of international documents into local languages to improve accessibility and promote systems for volunteer translations.

### **C. Recommendations to the UN agencies in the UNECE region**

- Support meaningful participation of civil society and trade unions in SDG implementation, promoting human rights and freedoms, including the freedom of association.
- Boost SDG financing through cooperation on development and international taxation, as well as through transparent debt relief and restructuring mechanisms.
- Assist governments in improving statistical data availability and comparability for robust analysis of SDG progress.





- Encourage mentorship initiatives and provide funded internship opportunities to facilitate youth engagement with numerous stakeholders, promote intergenerational dialogues to forge partnerships across age groups, and preserve institutional knowledge.

#### **D. Recommendations to the civil society in the UNECE region**

- Promote joint advocacy, inclusive data gathering, and monitoring at regional and national levels on SDGs follow-up and implementation, and human rights compliance.
- Engage in projects led by financial institutions, and assess them for added value to development policies and compliance with labour, fiscal, and environmental rules.
- Foster public awareness about the importance of SDGs and mobilise support for their implementation.

In conclusion, in a landscape of growing challenges, insecurity, and instability, especially with the ongoing wars and conflicts, the commitment of the youth of the ECE region to sustainable development is not just a choice but an absolute necessity, especially for the marginalised communities who bear the greatest vulnerability to ongoing challenges. Young people are not just the leaders of tomorrow; but the right holders and the Voice of Change today. In light of the upcoming High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the Summit of the Future, this Voice of Change urges governments, UN agencies and civil society to uptake the recommendations included in this Youth Report, to build a more sustainable and equitable future for all.