Economic and Social Council

Advance Unedited Version

High-level Political Forum on sustainable development
Convened under the auspices of the
Economic and Social Council
9 - 18 July 2019
Agenda item 2

Note by the Secretariat transmitting the reports of the regional forums on sustainable development

Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region on its third session

I.   Attendance

1.   The third session of the Regional Forum was held at the International Conference Centre Geneva (CICG), Geneva, starting on 21 March 2019 at 3 p.m. and concluding on 22 March 2019 at 6 p.m. The session was chaired by H.E. Ms. Ogerta Manastirliu, Minister of Health and Social Protection of Albania.

2.   The session was attended by representatives of the following 51 UNECE member States: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America and Uzbekistan.

3.   The following non-member States of UNECE attended: Colombia, Costa Rica, Mongolia.

4.   The European Union (EU) was represented by the Permanent Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva and the European Commission. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency also participated.

5.   Representatives of the following United Nations departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations, conventions, missions and entities attended the meeting: Environment Management Group, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Institute on Ageing, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, International

Telecommunication Union, International Trade Centre, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UN-Water, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Development Coordination Office, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 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 Interim Administration in Kosovo, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, United Nations Office at Geneva, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Volunteers, World Bank Group, World Food Programme, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Meteorological Organization and World Trade Organization. UN Resident Coordinators from 13 programme countries in the region also attended.

6.   Representatives of the following intergovernmental and regional organizations participated in the session: Central European Free Trade Area, Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Council of Europe, Council of Europe Development Bank, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Eurasian Economic Commission, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, Group on Earth Observations, Inter-Agency Network for Education on UN-International Goals, International Development Law Organization, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Nordic Council of Ministers, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Organization of American States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Regional Environmental Center for the Caucasus (REC Caucasus).

7.   Representatives of over 150 non-governmental organizations as well as representatives of academia, the private sector, human rights institutions, and other organizations also participated. A complete list of participants can be found on the website of the Regional Forum.[1]

II.   Opening and adoption of the agenda (Agenda item 1)

Documentation: Provisional agenda for the third session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region (ECE/RFSD/2019/1)

8.   The Regional Forum adopted the provisional agenda.

9.   In her opening remarks, the Chair emphasized that SDG progress needs to be pursued together with the people in the countries. It is crucial to leave no one behind and to ensure that societies do not suffer from inequalities and exclusion. The Chair also pointed out that gender equality is an intrinsic part of sustainable development and requires primary attention. The Regional Forum demonstrates that achieving the SDGs is a common undertaking and that governments, international organizations, civil society, scientists and businesses have an important part to play. Referring to the case of Albania, the Chair stressed that the country embraced the SDGs from the beginning. At the same time, the process of EU accession is a

---

[1] Available at: www.unece.org/rfsd2019.html.

main driver of reform efforts at the national level in a number of priority areas, which also helps implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

10. In her special address, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations recognized the regional forums as critical tools to maintain the ambition, review progress, and exchange practices towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The 2019 regional forums will pave the way for the high-level political forum under the auspices of ECOSOC and will also set the scene for the major sustainable development meetings taking place in New York in September, including the SDG Summit at the General Assembly. This region – as all the others – still has a way to go. An important accelerator for SDG implementation is breaking down the sectoral silos that constrain policy action. Also, intentions need to match with public and private financing. Gender equality and women's empowerment are also crucial. The UN is transforming to better support countries' efforts, including through an independent and empowered Resident Coordinator system and more cohesive, effective and accountable UN Country Teams. While the practice of collaboration among UN regional entities is well established in this region, work is ongoing to review and adapt all UN regional assets.

11. The UNECE Executive Secretary underscored that the Regional Forum has become the reference platform for sustainable development in the region. The meeting reflects very well the important role of UNECE in bringing together governments and other stakeholders across sectoral boundaries. It is also an expression of the strong collaboration among UN entities in the region. Many aspects of the 2030 Agenda have a transboundary dimension that is best addressed through regional cooperation. UNECE's normative work contributes to translating global goals into concrete commitments and guidelines for action in environment, transport, energy, trade and other areas. To maximize its impact in view of the SDGs, UNECE will focus on four "nexus" areas - the sustainable use of natural resources, sustainable and smart cities, sustainable mobility and smart connectivity, and measuring and monitoring SDG implementation.

12. The Chair of the Regional UNSDG Team for Europe and Central Asia pointed out that the current pace of progress in some areas is insufficient to fully meet the 2030 Agenda. Throughout the Europe and Central Asia region, governments are 'walking the talk' in terms of national coordination, resource mobilization and budget allocation, and by engaging parliaments and local authorities. However, a number of key challenges need to be addressed to accelerate progress, in particular rising inequalities, lack of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, access to quality education for marginalized communities, climate change, and ensuring peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

III. High-level Policy Segment: "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality in the UNECE region" (Agenda item 2)

13. The High-level Policy Segment started with a High-level Dialogue on "Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) as Drivers of SDG Implementation? National Experiences from UNECE countries", which was followed by a Plenary Debate.

14. The following panellists spoke in the High-level Dialogue on VNRs:

Mr. Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations

Ms. Laurence Monnoyer-Smith, Commissioner-General for Sustainable Development and Inter-Ministerial Delegate for Sustainable Development, Ministry for the Ecological and Solidary Transition, France

Ms. Larysa Belskaya, Director General of the Department for Multilateral Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belarus

Ms. Christina Baritaki, Secretary General for the Environment, Hellenic Ministry of Environment and Energy, Greece

Mr. Emin Sadik Aydin, General Director Sectors and Public Investments, Strategy and Budget Office of the Presidency, Turkey

15.　The following delegations intervened in the ensuing discussion and in the Plenary Debate: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Israel, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

16.　Civil society organizations conveyed to the Regional Forum the outcome of a preparatory civil society consultation that took place on 20 and 21 March 2019. The civil society positions were presented by Ms. Andrea Nakova, NGO "Journalists for Human Rights".

17.　The Chair's summary in the annex presents the main issues raised in this segment. Written statements are available on the website of the Regional Forum.[1]

IV.　Focus events and Peer Learning Segment (Agenda item 3)

Documentation: Compilation of case studies (ECE/RFSD/2019/INF1)

18.　Two focus events on cutting-edge topics affecting overall SDG implementation took place in parallel to the peer learning round tables. To facilitate practical and targeted peer learning, the Peer Learning Segment was structured into two sets of five parallel round tables, covering the following SDGs under in-depth review at the HLPF in 2019: SDGs 4, 8, 10, 13 and 16. Peer learning and interactive discussions were facilitated by presentations of case studies . Informal concept notes for all focus events and round tables as well as a compilation of all case studies are available on the website of the Regional Forum.[1] The Chair's summary in the annex contains a summary of the main challenges, policy responses and measures discussed at each focus event and round table.

(a) Focus events:

(i) Technology, digitalization, artificial intelligence: curse or blessing for sustainable development?

Moderator: Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director, Telecommunication Development Bureau, ITU

Panellists:

H.E. Ambassador Janis Karklins, Permanent Representative of Latvia to the United Nations in Geneva and Chairperson of the Economic Commission for Europe

Mr. Derek O'Halloran, Head, Digital Economy & Society, Member of the Executive Committee, World Economic Forum

Mr. Reinald Kruger, Vodafone Group Public Policy Development Director, Vodafone

Ms. Amela Odobašić, Head of Public Affairs, Communications Regulatory Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mr. Francois Grey, Director of the Geneva Tsinghua Initiative and Director of Digital Strategy for the University of Geneva

(ii) How to measure progress? Data and statistics for SDGs.

Moderator: Ms. Afshan Khan, UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia and Chair of the UN Regional Issue-based Coalition on SDG Data and Statistics

Panellists:

Ms. Anahit Safyan, Member of the State Council on Statistics of the Republic of Armenia

Ms. Joanne Evans, Head of Analysis and Engagement, Sustainable Development Goals, Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom

Mr. Jos Verbeek, Manager and Special Representative to the UN and WTO, World Bank Geneva

Ms. Marianne Haslegrave, Director, Commonwealth Medical Trust, Representative of the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism.

(b) Peer Learning Segment:

The following rapporteurs covered the two round tables under each SDG under in-depth review:

Mr. Roeland van Raaij, Senior Policy Officer, Strategy and Information, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Food Quality, Netherlands (SDG 4)

Ms. Nena Dokuzov, Head of Project Group of New Economies and Blockchain Technology, Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, Slovenia (SDG 8)

Mr. Yerlik Karazhan, Head of JSC "Economic Research Institute", Ministry of National Economy, Kazakhstan (SDG 10)

Mr. Laszlo Borbely, State Counsellor to the Prime Minister, Romania (SDG 13)

Ms. Nino Sarishvili, Executive Secretary of the National SDG Council of Georgia (SDG 16)

(i) Round Tables – First Set:

a. Learning without limits – Lifelong learning and inclusive education.

Moderators: Ms. Ana Luiza Massot Thompson-Flores, Director, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, and Ms. Krista Pikkat, Director, UNESCO Almaty Office

Case studies presented or submitted by: Armenia; Austria and Germany (jointly); France; Kyrgyzstan; Romania; Serbia; NGO League of Professional Women (Ukraine).

b. The growth we want – Solutions for sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Moderators: Ms. Marion Jansen, Chief Economist and Director, Division of Market Development, ITC and Ms. Maria Ceccarelli, Officer in Charge, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, UNECE

Case studies presented or submitted by: France, Germany, Georgia, Italy, Netherlands, Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Cooperativa Agricola Insieme (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Disability Hub Europe (Spain), Visa (Turkey).

c. Bridging the gap – Achieving greater income and economic equality.

Moderator: Ms. Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, Director, Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS, UNDP

Case studies presented or submitted by: Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (jointly); Georgia; Kyrgyzstan; Moldova; Serbia; Whiteshield Partners (Kazakhstan).

d. Acting for climate – Stepping up climate change policies, action and awareness in the region.

Moderators: Mr. Nikhil Seth, Executive Director, UNITAR and Mr. Karl Vella, Manager Climate Policy, World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)

Case studies presented or submitted by: Serbia; Tajikistan; Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment (Armenia); EcoClub (Ukraine); University of Geneva (Switzerland); Vaude (Germany); Women Engage for a Common Future (Netherlands).

e. Strengthening institutions for change – Fostering effective and inclusive governance for sustainable development.

Moderator: Mr. Tomas Rakos, Public Participation Expert (proposed by Czech Republic)

Case studies presented or submitted by: Albania; Czech Republic; Kyrgyzstan; Moldova; North Macedonia; Council of Europe; UN Women.

(ii) Round Tables – Second Set:

a. The power of knowledge for change – Education and learning as drivers of sustainable development.

Moderators: Mr. Marco Keiner, Director Environment Division, UNECE and Ms. Daniella Tilbury, Commissioner for Sustainable Development of Gibraltar and United Kingdom focal point to the UNECE Steering Committee on Education for Sustainable Development

Case studies presented or submitted by: Cyprus; Journalists for Human Rights (North Macedonia); Silviva Foundation (Switzerland); University of Gloucestershire (United Kingdom).

b. The future of work – Productive employment and decent work for all.

Moderators: Mr. Heinz Koller, Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, ILO and Ms. Alia El-Yassir, Regional Director Europe and Central Asia, UN Women

Case studies presented or submitted by: Azerbaijan; Bosnia and Herzegovina; North Macedonia; Turkmenistan; Serbia; Ukraine; Federation of Organisations Persons with Disability (Malta); Happy Tosti (Netherlands); WHO Collaborating Centre for Occupational Health (Croatia).

c. Towards a world of equal opportunity – Tackling inequality caused by exclusion and discrimination.

Moderators: Ms. Alanna Armitage, Regional Director Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNFPA and
Ms. Christine Brown, Head of the European Office for Investment for Health and Development, WHO

Case studies presented or submitted by: Armenia; Tajikistan; Turkey; Health Education and Research Association (North Macedonia); UN Volunteers; UN Women; Irish Men's Sheds Association (Ireland).

d. Coping with climate change – Strengthening resilience and adaptation.

Moderator: Ms. Dominika Reynolds, Advisor, Civil Protection and Crisis Planning Department,Ministry of Interior, Slovakia

Case studies presented or submitted by: France; Montenegro; Tajikistan; Academy of Medical Sciences (Croatia); E3G –Third Generation Environmentalism (UK); European Academies' Science Advisory Council (EASAC); Tecnofilm spa Compounds Termoplastici (Italy).

e. Empowering people to protect the planet – The environmental dimension of SDG 16.

Moderator: Ambassador Vuk Zugic, Coordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities, OSCE

Case studies presented or submitted by: Serbia; Ukraine; Office of the Ombudsman for Future Generations of Hungary; Supreme Court of Kazakhstan; Earth Justice (Switzerland); German Speleological Federation (Germany).

V. Connecting the Dots: Moving ahead towards empowerment, inclusion and equality in the region (Agenda item 4)

19.   H.E. Ambassador Ravesa Lleshi, Permanent Representative of Albania to the UN Office at Geneva, served as acting Chair for the remainder of the Regional Forum.

20.   The segment featured a reporting back from the youth pre-meeting, presented by Ms. Rosalyn Old, Board Member of the European Youth Forum, and the Regional Consultation on the Plan of Action for Integrating Volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda, presented by the Chair of the Regional Consultation, Mr. Yerlik Karazhan, Head of JSC "Economic Research Institute", Ministry of National Economy, Kazakhstan. Both meetings took place on 21 March 2019.

21.   The segment continued with a presentation of key messages from the focus events by the acting Chair and from the round table discussions by the five rapporteurs, followed by a moderated discussion on the major obstacles to making the linkages between SDGs in policy and practice, the enablers and good practices towards an integrated approach that allows for more rapid and sustainable results on SDGs. The discussion was moderated by Ms. Nadia Isler, Director of the SDG Lab in the Office of the UNOG Director-General. A keynote address entitled "Towards sustainable development: Interlinkages calling for systems transformations" was provided by Ms. Eeva Furman, Director of the Environmental Policy Centre at the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE and member of the independent team of

scientists preparing the 2019 UN Global Sustainable Development Report. The Chair's summary in the annex contains a summary of the discussion   and its main conclusions. Written statements are available on the website of the Regional Forum.[1]

VI.   Closing (Agenda item 5)

22.   Delivering closing remarks on behalf of civil society, Mr. Anton Leppik, Executive Secretary of the Pan-European Regional Council of the International Trade Union Confederation, stressed that dialogue and partnerships with civil society is essential for governments to achieve SDG progress. Inequalities are the main concern of civil society as a whole. The full compliance of states with international obligations is a precondition of SDGs. Independent and effective National Human Rights Institutions can serve as bridge-builders between state authorities and civil society. In view of significant challenges, an inclusive approach for "Just transition" brings together workers, communities, business and governments in dialogue towards concrete steps needed for climate-friendly resilient cities, environmental protection, sustainable economies and sustainable consumption. Addressing women's double burden of work and care across the life course is critical to close the gender gaps, including through recognition of unpaid care work, social protection and adequate pensions and gender-balanced parental leave. Social protection, quality public services and education are investments in the sustainability of societies.

23.   The Director-General of UNOG underscored that the year 2019 marks the end of the first 4-year cycle of the SDG review process. The SDGs have become a unifier of action and narrative across silos and disciplines and a global common road map to integrate efforts. There is a growing realization that the 2030 Agenda is about a fundamental, holistic shift. However, the pace is still too slow. The Regional Forum has demonstrated the vital role that regional actors play. The scope of ambition may be global, but the real action of implementation happens in national, regional, and local contexts. With over 100 international organizations, some 400 NGOs, representatives of 179 states, a vibrant private sector and world-class academic institutions, International Geneva provides a unique ecosystem and is in many ways the operational center of SDG implementation.

24.   In her closing remarks, the UNECE Executive Secretary stressed that it is the ambition of the Regional Forum to encourage breaking down sectoral barriers, stimulate innovative responses and draw in all relevant stakeholders across the region. The Regional Forum has been put on the map as a regular event that brings together the sustainable development community and encourages collaboration. It represents the broadest platform in the region for the exchange of policies and solutions.

25.   Before closing the meeting, the acting Chair informed participants that the draft report of the Regional Forum, including the Chair's summary of discussions, would be circulated for comments by participants. The final version would constitute the official input from the UNECE region to the 2019 HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC (New York, 9-18 July 2019).

Annex

Chair's summary of the discussions

High-level Policy Segment: Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality in the UNECE region

1.   The High-level Policy Segment provided an opportunity to discuss the impact of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on SDG implementation. In addition, participants shared their views on existing challenges and the lessons that can be drawn to advance the 2030 Agenda in the region.

2.   Monitoring and reporting are key for SDG implementation. The high-level political forum has a central role in reviewing the SDG implementation process. VNRs are challenging and require significant preparations, so it is advisable to start early. However, there are multiple benefits that can be derived from the catalytic impulse provided by VNRs in different areas relevant for advancing the 2030 Agenda.

3.   Some countries in the region have presented or are about to present a second VNR. While the emphasis in the first one was typically on defining plans for implementation, second VNRs are more focused on covering achievements and the progress made so far.

4.   VNRs should be well embedded in national realities. The preparation of VNRs allows a reflection on how the current situation fits with existing commitments. A process of analysis that translates targets/goals into the national context and clarifies responsibilities for implementation has often accompanied this preparation. National indicators may be adopted to operationalise the monitoring of the implementation of SDGs and define baselines.

5.   The alignment of national plans with the 2030 Agenda is critical to facilitate implementation and promote government ownership at different levels, thus supporting the integrated efforts that are necessary for success. VNRs are a source of inspiration that prompts new national initiatives. The engagement of all government institutions under a well-established oversight mechanism is conducive to high-quality outcomes. Good strategic guidance from such mechanisms can provide a sense of direction and ensure the coherence of disparate efforts.

6.   While the definition of the overall legal and operational framework takes place at the level of the central government, most measures are implemented at subnational levels. It is therefore essential to involve also subnational actors.

7.   The engagement of stakeholders in SDG implementation is essential for success. A whole-of-government approach should be complemented with a whole-of-society approach. VNRs, while driven by governments, provide an important opportunity to involve multiple actors, including the parliament, civil society, local governments, international organizations, universities, and business communities. The involvement of parliaments, in particular, has been acknowledged as providing a significant impulse. The participation of multiple stakeholders contributes to ensure that the principle of leaving no one behind is put into practice, including by considering specific policy proposals put forward by different groups.

8.   The involvement of non-government actors should not be limited to VNR preparations only. Some countries have given space to non-governmental voices also in the presentations of VNRs. Regular channels to communicate with these multiple actors are required, including with the support of an institutionalized framework for regular engagement.

9.   The preparation of VNRs can generate a broad public debate and encourage discussions among different groups. In this way, VNRs serve to increase awareness, crystallise positions and undertake new commitments. They can spur roadmaps for implementation that are truly national, going beyond government-led actions. However, it is important that governments fuel these nationwide processes through strategic communications.

10.   VNRs have served to establish new partnerships with various actors to provide new impulse to implementation. The dissemination and collection of good practices across a large number of stakeholders can be facilitated through online platforms.

11.   VNRs provide an opportunity to examine the extent to which implementation takes place under sectoral programmes or has become truly integrated. The broad mobilisation of multiple actors contributes to develop a better understanding of the linkages between different SDGs, so this knowledge can be translated into more effective policy action. Identifying key accelerators, such as gender equality or quality education, can support faster progress in implementation.

12.   VNRs should address not only national challenges but also the global effects of domestic actions. In this way, they provide also an opportunity to rethink international cooperation.

13.   Many lessons can be derived from the experience of other countries in the preparation of VNRs. The value of platforms and mechanisms that facilitate sharing these experiences, including the contributions of networks of national SDG coordinators, was acknowledged.

14.   VNRs can also benefit subregional cooperation, as they have encouraged reaching out to other countries to discuss how SDGs can prompt closer collaboration, including in connection with common EU integration processes.

15.   International cooperation can supply concrete inputs that benefit the VNR process. In terms of UN support, recommendations from interagency Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) missions, including the identification of key accelerators, have provided useful insights that can inform SDG implementation.

16.   There was a wide agreement that collecting the necessary data to support an evidence-based VNR is an important challenge, in particular regarding the need for disaggregation. The preparation of VNRs provide a rallying point to identify and address existing shortcomings in statistical capacity. The development of national reporting platforms that include metadata documentation on indicators contributes to progress.

17.   VNRs should be seen as a stepping stone in a long journey of development reforms and societal transformation. They feed into a continuous process of reviewing progress and adjusting policy actions. This process may take different forms depending on country-specific institutional arrangements but integrated planning and cross-sectoral perspectives are acknowledged as highly beneficial.

18.   Innovation has a particular role to play in speeding up the implementation of the SDGs. In some cases, specific organizations have been set up to cultivate creative ideas, identifying implementation and funding gaps, prototype solutions and raise public awareness. Scientific and social innovations have a strong potential that should be harnessed to ensure that no one is left behind.

19.   The transformative impact of SDGs was emphasized, as the implementation of the 2030 Agenda encourages administrative reforms and new ways of policymaking that break down sectoral barriers and reach out to different constituencies. However, using pre-existing governance arrangements to the extent possible can produce quicker results.

20.   Sharing the main messages from the civil society pre-meeting held on 20 and 21 March, the civil society representative stressed the importance of education and learning, including for marginalized groups and across the life cycle. Decent work and social protection are lacking across the region. Policies should spur the growth of well-being instead of GDP growth. Inequalities are increasing, and many people face discrimination and exclusion. To tackle climate change, it is crucial to ensure equitable access to sustainable energy, in particular access to small-scale renewable energy for low- and middle-income groups. There is a need to develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions, to ensure inclusive participation in decision-making processes, proactive disclosure of public information as well as access to information, in line with the Aarhus Convention.

Focus Events

Technology, digitalization, artificial intelligence: curse or blessing for sustainable development

21.   Technological change led by information and communications technology (ICT) holds great promise for sustainable development. Particular contributions can be made in the area of learning, addressing climate change, public participation, health, the reduction of transaction costs and productivity increases, including through trade facilitation.

22.   There are a number of promising technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Internet of Things and drones, that advance digital transformation and the 4th industrial revolution. ICTs can reduce inequalities by offering new opportunities for youth, older persons and persons with disabilities and helping to close the gender and rural/urban gaps.

23.   However, there also potential negative effects and emerging divides that need to be addressed. Challenges include privacy, data protection, cyber security, and ethical use. Digitalization is a source of economic dynamism, but it may also lead to drastic changes in labour markets and new demands for skills that leaves some workers exposed.

24.   Facilitating equitable access, guaranteeing affordability, promoting the acquisition of digital skills and strengthening trust are critical elements to reap benefits and avoid pitfalls. Standards can support interoperability and strengthen trust in the marketplace.

25.   An enabling environment where cross-sectoral aspects are considered is required to ensure that ICTs develop further and have a positive impact on SDGs. However, the suitable regulations, policies and investment models will differ depending on national circumstances and development levels. Getting these various aspects right would help in increasing the engagement of the private sector and would boost innovation.

26.   National authorities should have a leading role in advancing the use of ICTs for sustainable development. But all stakeholders need to work together, and governments should be open to the influence of civil society and industry. Partnerships across all sectors are necessary for progress. International cooperation has also an important role to play. The sharing of good practices can enable the identification of replicable aspects across countries.

27.   Although ICTs are not mentioned much in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, they are cross- cutting enablers for advancing the SDGs. For the last 14 years the global community has been building upon the outcomes of the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), including by stressing the importance of human-centered ICTs, to ensure that no one is left behind and that all ethical aspects are duly respected. The ongoing alignment of the WSIS and SDG processes is of paramount importance.

How to measure progress? Data and statistics for SDGs.

28.   The statistical community is making steady progress in improving the availability of data for measuring progress towards the SDGs. But the global SDG indicators alone will not be enough. Many countries are establishing additional national indicators to better inform policy action at national and local levels. Using new technologies to reduce cost and respondent burden, using qualitative data and process indicators are all important to improve data for decision-making. The regional dimension is essential to compare with and learn from countries in similar situations. The Conference of European Statisticians' Road Map on statistics for SDGs should be updated as a tool to give guidance.

29.   Additional financial resources are needed to develop national statistical capacity and modernize current systems as part of a critical national information infrastructure. Without these additional resources national statistics systems will focus on data production over analysis and dissemination, and economic sectors over social and environmental aspects.

30.   There are many examples of using data for policy-making on SDGs but also a lot of potential for improvement. To make data the lifeblood of decision making, capacities for use and analysis should be increased by improving accessibility, promoting open data culture, and engaging National Statistical Offices and decision-makers together in analytical processes. Intermediaries between data producers and policy makers are needed to make full use of the potential of data, in particular looking at dimensions of equity.

31.   There is a clear need to improve the disaggregation of data to give a fuller picture on the groups left behind. Complementary efforts for data collection on sensitive issues, like human rights and SDGs, should also be undertaken. Academia, private sector and civil society all have a role to play as both producers and users of data. Official statistics should seek strategic partners that can offer added value. There is a need for better clarity on the entry points for representatives from these stakeholder groups to engage with the official statistics community and to play a formal role in SDG monitoring processes.

Round Tables

Round Table SDG 4, First set. Learning without limits: lifelong learning and inclusive education

32.   Ensuring inclusive and quality education for all is essential for sustainable development. Granting equitable access to education and training to the most vulnerable groups of society requires a paradigm shift. Inclusion needs to be understood as a process of responding to the diverse needs of all learners at all stages of life.

33.   While the region has achieved high rates of participation in basic education, disparities based on wealth, location, gender, age and disability remain. Inclusive education systems require the reorganization of specialized education and the inclusion of all learners in regular schools to replace segregation of children with special needs.

34.   Vulnerable groups, specifically children with disabilities and from ethnic minorities, are often left behind; suffering from social attitudes that stigmatize, restrict opportunity and lower self-esteem. It is crucial to mobilize and engage all parts of society to overcome resistance towards inclusion.

35.   Change in education policies needs to be accompanied by long-term investments in capacities and the establishment of responsive government structures at all levels. Investments in competency training for teachers and educators is crucial to effectively implement curricula and to ensure quality education.

36.   Education reforms need to be centered around student learning, and policy interventions need to be consistent and forward-looking. Key factors that impact the quality of education are teacher training, content and relevance, pedagogical approaches and formative assessments and evaluations. Comprehensive approaches to learning assessment are needed, using a variety of measures for national and sub-national assessment purposes. Better collection of data allows for detailed analysis of trends, as well as disaggregation by key sub-groups.

37.   Learning opportunities should be diversified to respond to the different needs of learners. Education and learning opportunities for older persons ensures their full participation and contribution to society as well as the development of their skill set. The prospect of lifelong learning broadens the scope of individual options: empowerment, self-determination and fulfilment.

38.   The digital inclusion of older persons is crucial for their full participation in   social, economic and cultural life. The availability and accessibility of technology is a prerequisite. Digital training needs to use methodologies tailored to the needs of the target group and training needs to reach the learners, even in remote areas.

Round Table SDG 4, Second set. The power of knowledge for change: education and learning as drivers of sustainable development

39.   Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) enables learners to take informed and responsible decisions for creating sustainable societies. Citizens of all ages need to be able to acquire the knowledge and skills, as well as develop the attitudes and values, to support the transformation towards a more sustainable future.

40.   ESD requires innovative approaches to education, including the revision of learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and learning environments. ESD is a broad and challenging theme, going far beyond the traditional courses and specialized education on environmental issues. A broader reflection on the purpose and desired outcomes of education is needed to more directly contribute to sustainable changes.

41.   ESD is not confined to formal education or to classrooms but can take place in a diversity of environments, using innovative methodologies and informal settings. Effective learning and teaching are learner-centered and draw on interactive and exploratory elements, which include 'learning by doing' and 'learning in nature', e.g. through forest pedagogy, to inspire learners of all ages to act for sustainability.

42.   Learning processes need to actively engage stakeholders with different roles and backgrounds in bringing about change in processes, systems and everyday activities. Multi-stakeholder learning stimulates social learning or social innovation that come, often, as complementary to or with new technologies.

43.   Together with the necessity of acquiring new technological skills and introducing innovations for addressing environmental challenges, also global citizenship, behavioral change and principles of solidary need to be addressed. Changing the traditional top-down delivery of knowledge to a bottom-up learning route is required and goes hand in hand with promoting core competencies, such as collaborative decision-making.

44.   Political commitments are necessary for reflecting ESD in curricula and equipping teachers and educators with the necessary competences, while adequate funding is a pre-requisite. The embedding of ESD in institutional structures fosters coherent and integrated policies for sustainable societies. Country examples demonstrate effective cooperation between ministries of education and diverse sectoral ministries, as well as the establishment of special units for ESD within the ministerial structure, following multi-stakeholder consultation processes.

45.   International cooperation, partnerships and networks are necessary to further define and change education towards learning for sustainable development and to promote quality assurance and enhancement systems that support transformative learning.

Round Table SDG 8, First set. The growth we want: solutions for sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth

46.   Achieving sustained, sustainable and inclusive economic growth is a complex effort. It requires mobilising investments and harnessing the potential of trade and regional economic integration to support development that is more equitable and decoupled from environmental degradation through appropriate incentives and policies.

47.   Digitalization can have multiple effects on productivity, employment and trade. Enterprises, and especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), but also workers, have a lot to gain from the ongoing digital revolution, capable of lowering transaction costs and boosting competitiveness. At the same time, the uptake of new technologies poses multiple challenges and risks that need to be well understood.

48.   Institutional adaptation, suitable infrastructure and the dissemination of sound business practices should be promoted while avoiding social exclusion. However, investment is often insufficient and reaching out to SMEs, which are particularly disadvantaged, is difficult. Trade facilitation efforts, including through collaboration between the public and the private sectors, are required to reduce the cost of trade and facilitate integration into regional and global value chains.

49.   Digital technologies hold great promise, including for SMEs, but the integration of these technologies into business models is not easy. Cooperation with academia and improvement of traditional education systems are key to ensure that the relevant knowledge is available and used. Collaboration between the public and the private sectors contributes to unlocking the necessary investment in infrastructure and ensuring interoperability among digital systems.

50.   Growth should be decoupled from environmental degradation by disseminating knowledge and technologies that promote clean and resource-efficient production processes and infrastructure. Looking at the whole value chain is necessary to increase resource productivity and develop a circular economy that facilitates this decoupling. Broad stakeholder involvement is required, including regarding the monitoring of results. However, some participants argued that instead of decoupling, positive post-growth policies are necessary.

51.   Climate-related and other environmental disclosures can enhance transparency on companies' investment strategies while contributing to raise the necessary finance to support the transition to a green economy. Increased awareness among the public is necessary so there is a growing demand for green financial products.

52.   Gender equality and the leaving no one behind principle should be at the centre of implementation of all policies and actions. The benefits of technological change should be shared fairly. Technological innovation may also lead to the emergence of private monopolies which eventually restrict competition and have other detrimental effects.

53.   Conventional measures of economic activity such as GDP, have strong limitations. Alternative indicators that better capture the environmental and social impacts of economic activities should be explored. The emphasis on growth as currently measured can undermine the achievement of other goals.

54.   International cooperation has a key role on fostering sustainable and inclusive growth, including through the development of international standards which need to respond also to the needs of developing countries.

Round Table SDG 8, Second set. The future of work: productive employment and decent work for all

55.   Technological and demographic changes are influencing the dynamics of labour markets. Challenges affecting the region include inequality in access to the labour market and a gender pay gap, discrimination, youth unemployment, informality and integration of migrant workers. Social determinants of health such as poor or dangerous working conditions and a lack of income security can be major reasons for ill-health and should be addressed.

56.   Technological innovations should be seen in a positive light. Jobs will be destroyed but will also be created. An effective enabling environment for business that encourages innovation and investment is key, thus harnessing the expertise of the private sector for SDG implementation. Constant dialogue and partnerships between business and government, for example on skills, was a precondition for success. A universal entitlement to lifelong learning is needed. There is a need for active labour market policies targeting all ages.

57.   Full and productive employment of men and women is an overriding goal while gender equality is an accelerator for achieving multiple SDGs. Advancing those aims requires an enabling environment for business, to create jobs, invest and innovate. An ongoing dialogue between government, business and trade unions will support progress and inclusion. Respect for a normative agenda that includes fundamental workers' rights, mandatory social protection schemes, an adequate living wage, limits on hours of work and safety and health protection is essential.

58.   Addressing discrimination in the labour market, in particular all forms of gender biases and those that concern persons with disabilities and older workers, remains a major concern. Gender equality and the principle of leaving no one behind should be at the centre of implementation of all policies and actions to ensure productive employment and decent work for all.

59.   Quality childcare prepare children for the future and improve the employment opportunities for women. Investing in free universal quality childcare can significantly improve women's employment prospects and their earnings.

60.   Policy coherence and a multi-faceted approach are essential.   The involvement of partners and other actors, including through tripartite commissions involving trade unions and employers, is necessary. Comprehensive policy frameworks that mainstream SDGs implementation may include job creation targets, skills development, minimum wages and entrepreneurship programmes.

61.   Youth unemployment remains a major problem in many countries. Partnerships between government, business and education sectors can improve youth labour market prospects by identifying and addressing skill gaps, including through internships and apprenticeship opportunities. Support to job creation among the young can also include policies encouraging risk-taking and entrepreneurship.

62.   Trade raises the demand for skilled workers and increases the size of the formal sector. It supports the creation of jobs, higher earnings and the reduction of poverty but it has also distributional consequences. International cooperation is necessary to address protectionism.

63.   According to civil society, despite some good initiatives, the region is still suffering shortcomings in relation to decent work. Social dialogue and collective bargaining are still

insufficient and, in some countries, there are still violations of fundamental rights, including forced and child labour. The space for youth involvement in social dialogue is limited and there are insufficient quality jobs for them. The recommendations of the Global Commission for the Future of Work regarding the need for investment on people, jobs and institutions and a Universal Labour Guarantee, should be observed.

Round Table SDG 10, First set. Bridging the gap: achieving greater income and economic equality

64.   Inequality within countries has seen a global rise over the past three decades. The dynamics of extreme wealth, power and exclusion subvert political processes and leave disadvantaged people and countries locked out of the benefits of globalization and growth. Diverging incomes is leaving humanity divided and undermining the sustainable development of nations.

65.   Poverty is expected to remain a persistent challenge for the middle- and low-income countries in the region. Rural populations are particularly affected, usually having fewer employment opportunities and weaker social protection systems. Small-scale investments, including through remittances, are key to boost rural development, support income diversification and reduce   inequality between rural and urban communities.

66.   There are significant measurement problems on inequality. Different data sources and indicators produce different results. Using consumption data tends to show a better picture than indicators based on income. The Gini coefficient remains sensitive to the tail distribution but allows for cross-country comparison and aggregation of global inequality data. Analysis of the bottom 40 per cent mixes the most vulnerable groups with the middle class. Analysis of the top 1 per cent tells us something on income and wealth concentration but nothing on the   most vulnerable groups. Good disaggregated inequality and poverty data is a precondition for designing appropriate policies.

67.   Comprehensive social protection is required to reduce inequalities and achieve the SDGs. The most pressing challenge is to increase coverage and improve targeting effectiveness. However, most countries are struggling with fiscal imbalances and excessive public debt so the expansion of redistributive programs is constrained. Fiscal space may be created by reallocating spending from other government sectors, increasing tax revenues or expanding social insurance coverage and contributions. Policy dialogues should also be fostered around the progressive implementation of social protection floors and minimum standards for food security and nutrition.

68.   The use of income-redistribution policies is subject to other limits. Excessive redistribution can undermine incentives to work, productivity and innovation. Political and administrative capacity to deliver well-targeted redistributive programs is limited. Redistributive policies must be concentrated on most vulnerable groups. Successful examples include active labour market policies, support to micro- and small-businesses or income support conditional on eventual entering the labour market.

69.   Delivering high-quality public goods, which are available to all groups, such as education, healthcare, technical and municipal infrastructure or public security, can also improve the chances of excluded groups in the longer term. Eliminating market distortions which result in economic and social exclusion or create privilege positions for some groups can help to reduce inequalities.

Round Table SDG 10, Second set. Towards a world of equal opportunity: tackling inequality caused by exclusion and discrimination

70.   Despite progress in the region in addressing social inequalities, regional and national averages often mask major inequalities. Challenges persist with regard to inequalities between different population groups and geographical areas, in particular urban and rural settings. Discrimination has many faces and may relate to gender, ethnicity, origin, age, sexual orientation, disability or other factors, which may at times intersect. Discrimination and stereotyping affect the legal and administrative status of the persons concerned, their life expectancy, well-being and health, among others.

71.   In recent years, advances in gender equality, women's rights and the empowerment of women and girls in the region have been uneven, with setbacks in some areas. Violence against women and girls   is a persistent phenomenon that no country has yet managed to eliminate. A comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to counter gender-based violence and discrimination is most effective, including legislative measures, policy and capacity development. At a very early stage, gender imbalances can be prevented by tackling prenatal sex selection, favouring boys over girls.

72.   Addressing the social determinants of health is critical in reducing health inequalities, leading to higher and equitable levels of well-being, increased life-expectancy across different population groups, and reduced morbidity and mortality across the region. Health is impacted by lack of access to affordable, adequate, decent and sustainable housing, and food, income and employment insecurity. Also, a sense of belonging and a feeling of safety are important. In this context, peer-led and community-based initiatives can deliver positive outcomes for members of marginalized groups by learning from and interacting with each other on health-related as well as other aspects of community life.

73.   The local level is well placed to formulate, implement and monitor social inclusion policies and projects, including for ethnic minorities, such as Roma, and migrants. Development of skills and employment opportunities and promoting interaction with other population groups has proven effective in reducing social tensions, addressing discrimination and strengthening social cohesion.

74.   Altogether, a basket of interventions is available to prevent and address the various forms of discrimination, ranging from hard instruments, such as laws and regulations, to soft tools, such as awareness-raising and dialogue. In all approaches, it is central to hear the voices of the people affected and to fully take into account the diversity of societies in all stages of the policy-making process.

Round Table SDG 13, First set. Acting for climate: stepping up climate change policies, action and awareness in the region

75.   Climate change is one of the greatest and most pressing challenges that presently exist. Tackling it will require far-reaching economic, social and environmental changes. It is important to respect, promote and consider human rights when taking climate action. To date, action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions worldwide and in the region is clearly insufficient, as shown by recent analysis by UN Environment (2018 Emissions Gap Report) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2018 Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5° C). Action needs to be scaled up at the political level, key groups such as consumers, civil society, youth need to be further mobilized, and opportunities presented by

technological progress and sustainable business and financing models need to be fully leveraged. The UNECE region has the potential to pioneer decisive climate action.

76.   The Paris Agreement is the key multilateral framework for climate change mitigation, adaptation, and finance. It is crucial that the agreement will be backed by action and fully implemented. The package agreed at the 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Katowice, Poland, represents an important step in this direction, setting out the essential procedures and mechanisms to operationalize the Paris Agreement.

77.   Significant climate change action and contributions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions are required from all stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental. At the national level, governments - as well as parliaments - may consider appropriate legal, regulatory and fiscal measures, such as carbon pricing, to mitigate climate change. Local authorities and institutions can play an important role in finding low-carbon solutions that fit the needs of communities. Nature-based solutions also provide effective options to address climate change while simultaneously contributing to other SDGs. Civil society is a key actor to raise climate change awareness, change behavioural patterns and contribute to national and local climate action.

78.   Moreover, the required scale of climate change action cannot be achieved without businesses and the private sector. More sustainable business models and reporting practices are on the rise. The private sector will also be crucial to help spread innovative solutions and the use of digital technologies to address climate change. In addition, unlocking and redirecting private resources towards climate change mitigation will be essential, together with other sources of financing, including the Green Climate Fund and the Global Environment Facility.

79.   It is important to include a gender perspective in climate action. Capacity-building of civil servants and involvement of civil society and community groups can help integrate gender considerations when devising specific policies and measures for climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience. As evidenced by practical examples, engaging women will contribute to the much-needed acceleration of climate action.

Round Table SDG 13, Second set. Coping with climate change: strengthening resilience and adaptation

80.   The region is highly exposed to risks from natural hazards. Because of climate change, the frequency and intensity of extreme events have increased in the region, with more heat waves, forest fires, torrential rains, floods and droughts. Natural disasters have not only left a trail of victims, but also caused severe health consequences, economic loss and damage to infrastructure, impairing economic growth and potential for sustainable development.

81.   Many extreme weather events and climate change impacts are water-related (for example floods and droughts). Since the majority of freshwater resources in the region are crossing borders, transboundary and regional cooperation in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction can help to prevent negative impacts of unilateral measures and make adaptation measures more effective.

82.   National and local disaster risk reduction and adaptation strategies, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR), are necessary to address the continuing growth of climate risks in the region. Gender aspects should be well reflected in these strategies. Appropriate climate-sensitive spatial planning approaches are particularly

important to prevent and mitigate effectively the consequences of future disasters and the waste of public resources.

83. Climate change is expected to have a detrimental impact on health. Healthcare services need to be prepared to act quickly especially towards vulnerable populations. To ensure a swift and effective health sector response, preparation and contingency planning should engage multiple stakeholders. Health should become an integral part of national adaptation planning, and health considerations should be included in other sectors' adaptation strategies. Plans that address health interventions in response to climate change have proven successful in several countries across the region.

84. Food security is one of the elements that need to be considered when talking about disaster-risk reduction. Agriculture production and food systems will be affected by climate change in Europe and elsewhere. At the same time, current agricultural practices are a contributor to climate change, so alternative methods need to be explored.

85. Public-private cooperation is critical. The private sector can be a powerful actor regarding prevention and emergency management. The Sendai Framework emphasizes the need for risk informed investments to achieve disaster resilience. Therefore, resilience should be embedded in the ongoing sustainable finance initiatives. However, the urgency of addressing climate change is, not yet sufficiently understood and accepted. This leads to underestimating the risks involved for companies and financial institutions. A poor appreciation of risks and their impact leads to insufficient financing.

86. There is a need to better understand coping capacity while continuing to upgrade critical infrastructure. The coherence across development and disaster risk-reduction strategies should be reinforced while seeking to engage SMEs in related efforts. The implementation of SDG 13 in coherence with the Sendai Framework contributes to addressing underlying causes of fragility and crises.

Round Table SDG 16, First set. Strengthening institutions for change: fostering effective and inclusive governance for sustainable development

87. Governments in the region are acknowledging the crucial importance of effective governance systems in support of the 2030 Agenda and have introduced national coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting.

88. Linkages between national development planning, budgeting, and financing need to be further strengthened. The strong emphasis on inclusive and integrated strategic planning needs to be matched by an equally strong emphasis on effective and efficient implementation. SDG financing that promotes inclusive, transparent, innovative, gender-sensitive and responsive actions is key. It is critical to ensure that public resources and services go to the most vulnerable.

89. Peace is a pre-condition for sustainable development. Countries need to be able to identify and address critical risks and drivers of conflict, migration, violence, and radicalism, among others. This requires ensuring the protection and promotion of fundamental human rights and the effective implementation of the rule of law.

90. Enhancing the capacity of justice, security and human rights institutions and enhancing service delivery and protection, especially of vulnerable groups, is critical to nurture public trust and confidence.

91. Whole-of-society approaches are necessary to ensure effective SDG implementation in all countries. Civil society, the private sector, academia, community-based organizations, volunteers, and activists all have important roles in ensuring the effective performance of

national institutions. However, in many countries these organizations face increasing social, economic and political pressures.

92. National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) in compliance with the UN Paris Principles function as bridges between state authorities and civil society and generate public awareness about the relevance of the SDGs and human rights in people's daily lives.

93. The increased use of ICT applications in public service delivery systems, citizen engagement processes, public information campaigns and advocacy through social media, have advanced governance systems and processes in many countries. At the same time, ICTs have increased inequalities and social and economic exclusion particularly in countries with wide digital divides. Inclusive and tailored approaches to public needs and demands need to be recognized as part of governance solutions.

94. Data challenges exist for SDG 16 planning, monitoring and reporting. They require innovative approaches and solutions, in addition to enhancing institutional capacities and systems in national statistical offices and agencies. The use of non-traditional or alternative data (big data, real-time feedback systems, etc.) needs to be recognized as equally valid for SDG monitoring and reporting. Third-party or shadow reports further enhance transparency and national commitment to inclusive monitoring and reporting on the SDGs.

95. Lack of knowledge regarding legal provisions and governance systems could derail important democratic processes and potentially lead to public misinformation. Civil society, including local activists, religious leaders and brand ambassadors, could play a vital role in engaging citizens and contribute to a more cohesive society. In this regard, open government partnerships have been considered effective mechanisms to enhance transparency and foster civic engagement processes.

96. The active engagement of all stakeholders, including young men and women, not only as part of participatory processes but also in identifying demand-driven, innovative development solutions that are relevant and appropriate to their needs, should be actively pursued by national institutions at all levels.

97. Continuous learning opportunities, including through training, mentorship and coaching mechanisms and ensuring modern approaches particularly within civil service academies, are critical to enhancing institutional as well as human capacities. Tailored approaches particularly for vulnerable groups would allow greater responsiveness for transformational change.

Round Table SDG 16, Second set. Empowering people to protect the planet: the environmental dimension of SDG 16

98. Climate change, the loss of biodiversity and air and water pollution are among the global environmental problems that affect everyone's health and wellbeing. Tackling such challenges in the context of social and economic development is at the very heart of efforts to attain the SDGs. Public rights to timely access information and to participate in decision-making in environmental matters are essential for the effective response to these challenges. Access to justice is a guardian for securing these rights. The success in furthering the environmental dimension of SDG 16 thereby contributes to the achievement of all goals.

99. The UNECE region has made good progress in promoting this dimension. The vast majority of countries have supporting legislative, institutional and practical measures in place, and modern technologies significantly assist Governments in their efforts.

100. Online portals and smartphone applications are used to increase the effectiveness of public participation procedures in environmental impact assessment. These tools also help to

access public services and reduce corruption by making authorities' decisions more transparent.

101. One of the vehicles to channel public views into decision-making processes are National Human Rights Institutions. As an example, an Ombudsman for Future Generations Office initiated stakeholders' consultations and successfully channelled their outcomes into shaping legislation better aligned with the SDGs.

102. The organization of public participation procedures in a transboundary context proves to be challenging across the region. At the same time, it was demonstrated that specific legislative and practical measures could, indeed, make the effective engagement of the public a reality.

103. The rule of law and accountable and transparent institutions require effective and independent judicial review procedures. Challenges to achieve this can include the limited capacity of judges to handle environmental cases along with the absence of specialized courts dealing exclusively with environmental matters. Capacity-building for judges, such as mentoring and in-house trainings in courts with significant experience in environmental adjudication are practical measures to address these challenges.

104. A response to growing security concerns can lead to restricting access to information and possibilities for public participation, thereby affecting the attainment of SDG 16. Examples were presented how countries overcame this challenge, by allowing broad accreditation of NGOs and establishing a designated area for civil society next to the venue of an important global meeting, and by promoting the protection of human rights defenders through international instruments and bilateral agreements.

105. Factors contributing to these achievements include strong political will and close cooperation within and across sectors; promotion of transparent, inclusive and participatory decision-making, planning and implementation at all levels; effective access to justice; the provision of enabling space for environmental defenders. These factors have been catalysed through two solid legal guardians in the region - the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers. These instruments help governments make significant advancements in promoting the environmental dimension of SDG 16. In a number of countries, Aarhus centres have been created as supporting partners of these instruments.

106. To reinforce the ability of the Governments to further this dimension, a number of priority actions were identified. These include promoting greater political support to transparency, the rule of law, accountability and effective and inclusive public participation in decision-making; encouraging the use of modern technologies and innovative approaches to managing integrated data; allocating sufficient resources and strengthening the capacity of governmental authorities and relevant stakeholders to support the required measures; promoting effective and independent administrative and judicial review procedures by eliminating standing-related, financial and other barriers, by strengthening the capacities of review bodies and by fostering international judicial cooperation; taking measures to promote safe and enabling space for the public and ensuring "zero" tolerance for any threats towards environmental defenders; identifying measurable indicators and monitoring methodologies, and collecting relevant statistics on the implementation of the environmental dimension of SDG 16.

Connecting the Dots: Moving ahead towards empowerment, inclusion and equality in the region

107. Reporting back from the first-ever youth pre-meeting to the Regional Forum, the youth representative stressed the lack of action in view of alarming trends such as mass extinction of species, threats to the global climate system and increasing inequality. Youth stands ready to put their valuable skills, experience and knowledge to good use and to lead the change. Youth is eager to engage in education that promotes skills for life, meaningful work, real inclusion and dialogue as equals.

108. A key message emanating from the Regional Consultation on the Plan of Action for Integrating Volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda is that volunteers can be powerful SDG accelerators if they are fully integrated into national frameworks. The ambitions of the 2030 Agenda require mobilising extraordinary resources, including people. There are many volunteers in the UNECE region but to harness their potential, volunteerism should be mainstreamed into international development strategies and incorporated into national SDG roadmaps. Access barriers that prevent volunteerism should be reduced. An increased focus on measuring the impact of volunteers' activities on SDGs would provide evidence to build a stronger case for volunteerism. Volunteers themselves can be powerful data collectors, especially in collecting data covering groups left furthest behind. Regional discussions can contribute to foster the role of volunteerism.

109. The design and implementation of policies purely across sectoral lines remains an unaddressed challenge for advancing the 2030 Agenda. Many important implications of policy actions in critical areas are missed because of this silo nature. The importance of linkages is generally acknowledged but an integrated approach to policymaking will not emerge spontaneously. Bringing together disparate interests requires creating appropriate incentives and supportive multi-stakeholder structures. While the problems are well known, finding the solutions is challenging.

110. Analysis of linkages across the 17 SDGs shows that potential for synergies is larger than the presence of trade-offs. This is an auspicious base to build cross-sectoral coalitions for change to reap benefits and to address the costs of interventions that may act as a barrier for transformation. Regional dimensions and the diversity of situations should be considered when providing policy recommendations.

111. Science can clarify interactions between different targets thus offering guidance for more effective action. Sustainability science should be interdisciplinary and look at the impacts beyond national borders. Using existing structures, such as the national academies of science, as a source of knowledge and conveners can be used to strengthen the science-policy interface.

112. Dealing with trade-offs requires communicating the implications of policy actions. Overall, policies should be based on human rights obligations and be responsive to those left behind. These aims need to be supported by appropriate data. Cooperation with statistical offices, civil society organizations and national human rights institutions, help to fill data gaps.

113. Efforts to understand linkages should be an integral part of the search for levers to generate the necessary transformation. This understanding should not be seen as adding new complexities but, by contrast, providing clearer routes for action on the basis of identified multipliers.

114. The analysis of linkages shows the need for international cooperation to tackle these interactions. Despite progress in multiple areas, there is no country that can claim to have achieved sustainable development, reconciling economic prosperity with the respect to the

environment and social inclusion. Poverty and inequality, from a social perspective, and climate change and biodiversity, from an environmental lens, are critical turning points that challenge the international community into action. The urgency of addressing climate change cannot be stressed enough.

115.   Systemic transformations will be required in many areas critical for sustainable development, including energy decarbonisation and access and food and nutrition, among others. Actions in these areas will generate complex spill over effects on various SDGs that need to be assessed. The challenges for gender parity and social inclusion vary through the lifecycle.

116.   Translating analysis of linkages and interdependencies into coherent action remains difficult, given the need to arbitrate conflicts of interest and overcome the political dominance of short-term considerations. With a silo mentality still prevalent, sustainable development considerations have not yet penetrated into key decision-making areas.

117.   Engaging the private sector expertise and ingenuity is essential to generate new solutions for sustainable development. Shifts in lifestyle preferences are required to create the demand that supports the emergence of sustainable systems of production and consumption. Transformative action at the individual level is indispensable for systems change.

_____