



**REGIONAL FORUM**  
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE UNECE REGION

Geneva | 19 March 2020

*INTERVENTION*

*by*

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**Chair of the 2020 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region**

**at the 2020 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) virtual session**

*“Messages from the Regions”*

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*Check against delivery*

**Your Excellency ECOSOC Vice-President, Ambassador Hilale,**

**Madame Moderator and Executive Secretary, Ms. Songwe,**

**Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,**

It is my pleasure to share with you some key messages from this year's Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region, which I had the honour to chair.

The meeting took place on 19 March 2020 under challenging circumstances at the very beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown in Europe and was therefore held as a virtual meeting.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic worsening of the economic situation throughout the UNECE region and to immediate negative consequences for multiple SDGs, including health and gender equality.

In this context, the Regional Forum highlighted the critical role of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals as a blueprint for a green, inclusive and sustainable recovery in the post-COVID-19 era. Efforts to limit the development setback caused by the pandemic and to accelerate SDG progress are now more important than ever to overcome the COVID-19 crisis and to "build back better".

While the official report of the Regional Forum has been issued, let me highlight brief messages in four areas within my speaking time:

1) [What are the major challenges in the region that require faster SDG progress?](#)

Overall, UNECE countries had been making good progress in many areas, such as eradicating extreme poverty; maternal, infant and child mortality; sanitation; and lowering the energy intensity of the economy. However, no country in the region is on track to achieving the SDGs. With its predominantly high- and middle-income countries, the region faces considerable challenges in particular on sustainable consumption and production, climate action, life below water and life on land (SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15).

During the COVID-19 crisis, some environmental pressures have eased because of lower economic activity. But this is a temporary phenomenon that does not reflect policy or structural changes. Overall, the reconstruction agenda should be well aligned with the green transformation and the SDGs.

## 2) What is the role of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)?

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, many countries have taken the opportunity to present VNRs at this HLPF. Including this year, 54 out of the 56 UNECE member States will have undertaken a VNR, over 95 per cent of the membership.

My own country Azerbaijan presented two VNRs at the HLPF in 2017 and 2019, following the establishment of the National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development in 2016.

Given the increasing number of second- and third-timers, a feedback loop between two VNR exercises of one country could be considered in the future.

Governments at the Regional Forum underlined that VNRs provide an opportunity to strengthen the national institutional framework for SDG implementation, integrated national planning, and the management of trade-offs between different policies and interests. Scientists and statisticians involved in the VNR process could support policy-makers in taking sound decisions.

Civil society recognized their engagement in the VNR process in many countries, and called on governments to widely adopt this practice.

## 3) What actions can be effective to accelerate SDG progress, and which actors can spur additional momentum?

More decisive action is needed to speed up SDG progress and to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. It is also crucial to engage additional and innovative actors that can support a broad-based movement of societies towards sustainable development, such as youth, innovators, businesses and cities.

A number of such actions and actors were highlighted at the Regional Forum, including the EU's European Green Deal, the strategies of Finland and Sweden to achieve carbon neutrality, the involvement of youth in climate policies in Denmark, and the UNECE challenge to plant more trees in cities.

#### 4. What is the role of economic transformation, finance and technology for SDG acceleration?

Lastly, finance and technology have ample potential to boost greener products and services, investments in sustainability and sustainable recovery. One session co-organized by UN Environment and ITU highlighted the need to actively redirect financial flows towards a new type of growth based on circularity, carbon neutrality and nature-based solutions. Leveraging digital technologies and broadening internet access will also help create new opportunities for producers and consumers to adopt sustainable business models and lifestyle choices.

I thank you for your attention.

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