



Welcome remarks

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and
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Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States**

**UN DESA Webinar Series
Sustainable Transport and COVID-19: Response and Recovery**

8:30-10:00am

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Virtual Meeting

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly welcome you to our webinar.

This is our second webinar organized by UN DESA on Sustainable Transport and COVID-19: Response and Recovery.

As your High Representative for LDCs, LLDCs and the SIDS, I very much welcome and support this session on the Impact of COVID-19 on countries in special situations.

I look forward to the sharing of both the challenges but also experiences to date with the representatives from LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Pandemics by their very definition know NO BORDERS, no race, no religion- everybody is affected. It is the ways in which we get affected that vary.

We are only begging to understand and see the far-reaching and complex social, economic, institutional and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis is a development crisis. The crisis will have disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable people and countries in the world. The constraints if not reversals of growth and development will be felt hardest in the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

It is due to factors such as their small size, limited levels of diversification, structural challenges and vulnerability to external shocks.

The group of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS accounts for 91 countries or almost half of the UN membership and around 16% of the world population.

Now contrast this with their exports accounting for just around 2% of global exports.

LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS already prior to the pandemic faced complex challenges to their inclusive and sustainable development and integration into the global economy.

They have been hit hard by COVID-19 and had and continue to have to focus on combatting its spread. This means already scarce resources and limited fiscal capacity have to be even further stretched.

Supply chains have been disrupted.

Internal and external restrictions on movements of people have been introduced and borders and airports have shut down.

Take the SIDS.

With the closure of borders, many of the more remote small island communities are simply cut off and have become increasingly vulnerable.

Travel and related restrictions have triggered almost insurmountable hurdles to address the negative shocks such as the most recent category 5 cyclone Harold in the Pacific. A cyclone which has greatly affected lives, livelihoods, and infrastructures in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and my own country Tonga.

A main source of revenue is tourism.

International tourism has come to a halt. At this stage, nobody knows if and when we may return to tourism levels we had prior to the pandemic. Recent data from the airline industries, for example, or those from sea travel show that we cannot hope for speedy recoveries.

Even where borders remained open, it is new and additional controls slowing down trade and the distribution of goods.

This greatly impacts in particular the landlocked developing countries. they highly rely on transit of goods through neighboring countries.

So, it is across the entire specter of the economy from industries to services to agriculture and including the transport sector that we can see major disruptive impact. Needless to say, the impact on employment and thus livelihoods is enormous. And in most instances, there is no fiscal or monetary space for social security provisions !

The estimates of the global effects are sobering.

For example, world trade is set to decline by between 13 to 32 percent in 2020. International tourist numbers could fall between 60 to 80 percent in 2020.

Beyond any doubt, we now will see reversals of the progress made in these countries towards the achievement of the SDGs and their dedicated Programmes of Action.

We already knew prior to the advent of COVID-19, that the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS would face major challenges in providing adequate access to affordable transport services and in advancing sustainable transport solutions.

For these countries transport is a key precondition of sustainable development.

It is a domestic must and a conduit for international trade.

It is now that we must invest in efficient transport systems and innovative solutions in the transport sector.

It all goes back to the age old question of getting people and produce to market and services.

Infrastructure investment has the potential to alleviate impacts from the COVID-19 and help countries recover better.

Just look at the key role of transport in ensuring delivery of much-needed medical supplies, food and other necessary goods within and to affected countries.

Supply chains and transport networks for goods, in particular to vulnerable countries, need to remain open and must be functional and functioning.

For this to work, global and regional collaboration on transport connectivity have a key role to play.

It is a collaboration that we must enhance to ensure that we do not further exclude the most vulnerable countries from international trade.

Value chains are globalized by now and therefore interconnected. They rely on cross-border transport systems. It is self-evident that our responses therefore must be coordinated.

The pandemic response has shown a very high digital element be it in schooling, telemedicine, teleworking, or online ordering of goods or food. But we know the high degree of inequality in resorting to such solutions.

So it is now that we also must invest in countries' capacities to be able to take advantage of existing digital solutions so they can limit physical contact during border clearance processes and in the transit of goods. The solutions for electronic information exchange or electronic cargo tracking are available, and it is access that is the issue.

The time is now for capacity building and technical assistance to be provided to the most vulnerable countries in support of the use of new technologies and innovations in the transport sector.

Looking to recovery, the transport sector can be a driver of economic growth post COVID-19.

Strong mitigation and recovery plans are urgently needed to support the safe opening of passenger transport and the tourism sectors, so that it can again generate jobs and returns across the whole economy.

The current crisis also bears an opportunity.

It is the opportunity to make the transport sector more sustainable and accelerate our efforts to make transport more climate and environment friendly. This must include enhancing sustainable energy sources needed for moving goods and people.

Take the example of the Euro-Asia region.

There has been an increase in the use of railway transport. It is an efficient means for transporting people and goods especially when new, clean energy means are used. In this way environmental benefits can be derived but it also is a means to make cross-border transport systems more efficient.

NOW is the time to maintain and scale up our actions and invest in innovative transport solutions in response to the pandemic. And we must do it smartly. We must integrate support to climate action and the achievement of other SDGs in our solutions.

The transport systems must be more resilient to the impacts of external shocks, whether it be climate change, natural disasters or situations similar to COVID-19.

The current reality is that the COVID-19 pandemic forced and forces countries to make hard choices between short- term and medium to long term investments. This means diverting investment meant for transport infrastructure development towards buying the emergency supplies needed for the fight against COVID-19.

As we enter the recovery period, it is important to ensure that transport infrastructure development gets the priority investment it deserves and that resources are mobilized.

UN-OHRLLS will continue to advocate for enhanced transport connectivity for the LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS and accelerated transport-related responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

We have already joined forces with other UN system agencies and other organizations to call for action during the COVID-19 crisis and recovery.

We issued joint statement with UNCTAD and the UN Regional Commissions for Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America calling for smooth transit and transport facilitation from LLDCs, as well as joint statement with WCO calling for improved transit facilitation.

I hope our webinar helps in the exchange of best practices and solutions that can help the transport sector respond to the challenges of COVID-19 and build back better for all.

Thank you.