

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region (Geneva, 21-22 March 2019)

Opening remarks by the Chairperson

H.E. Ms. Ogerta Manastirliu, Minister of Health and Social Protection of Albania

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Excellencies, Deputy Secretary-General, Executive Secretary, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon and welcome to all of you!

It is my distinct pleasure and privilege to open this year's Regional Forum. I am impressed to see such a large audience. It is an honour for me and my country, Albania, to chair this meeting. I thank my fellow UNECE governments for entrusting me with this role.

You have all come to Geneva to speak and to learn about how to make our region more sustainable. This is a cause that is now more important than ever. In striving for progress, it is crucial that we do this together with the people in our countries, truly leaving no one behind and ensuring that our societies do not suffer from inequalities and exclusion.

This is not an easy journey, but I am encouraged to see governments, international organizations, civil society, scientists and businesses representatives together in this room. It is a recognition that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is a common undertaking and each group has an important part to play.

You have dedicated one and a half days from your busy schedules to come to the Regional Forum. This is a considerable investment. Let us use this time the best we can. In the 4th year of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, we have an opportunity today and tomorrow to take stock of where we stand, to draw lessons, to look at policies that work or perhaps do not work, and to talk about the difficulties we are facing in our everyday efforts. I invite you to actively share your experiences and to contribute to the discussions whenever you can.

Allow me to say that Albania embraced the SDGs from the beginning, offering ourselves even before September 2015 to help develop pilot indicators for SDG 16. We are working to find ways to identify accelerators for sustainable development. And we have one mega-accelerator that is common for many countries in the region - EU accession - the main driver of reform efforts in the country. But what we consider important is that while the process of EU accession mostly focuses on economic and governance dimensions, it is critical to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development with EU accession aspects. SDGs can support a shift to a more sustainable future.

In this context, the achievements of SDGs are interlinked with the completion of many complex and interrelated reforms, in five priority areas - public administration reform, independent judicial institutions, zero tolerance towards corruption, fighting organized crime, and ensuring the protection of human rights. You will hear more details about some of these reforms in the peer learning roundtables tomorrow. I

would highlight in particular a transformative justice reform that is under implementation. It will ensure strengthening the independence, efficiency and accountability of judicial institutions. The results are shocking but impressive. To date, more than half of prosecutors and judges reviewed have been dismissed due to rigorous vetting, most on grounds of being unable to justify their assets.

Let me emphasize that gender equality is an intrinsic part of sustainable development. We need strong women everywhere – not only on this podium! We can't deliver on 17 sustainable development goals, if we don't give primary attention to Goal number 5. Empowerment of women and girls through their representation in political decision-making has shown progress in Albania. Albania's new parliament emerging from the 2017 elections has the highest number of women deputies in almost 30 years. The Government Cabinet has more women than men. In 2018, the national budget dedicated to gender has more than doubled compared to 2017.

For the first time, we have a woman General in the armed forces and there are more women in the police. And we will do much more to increase women's empowerment and achieve gender equality.

Overall, the Government continues to pursue SDG efforts. I thank UN Albania for its continuous support to the Government and other actors in the SDG path.

However, challenges remain.

The achievement of SDGs should be considered as an integrated process, rather than working in an isolated sectorial approach. For this purpose the Government has established Integrated Policy Management mechanisms that consider the achievement of SDGs inseparable from EU accession.

Investments in health and education are central as they serve as key accelerators to Albania's development.

To achieve the SDGs we need trusted data. Therefore, the strengthening of national monitoring and evaluation systems, institutional capacities, data collection, coherence, and innovations remains our focus.

To respond to the above and more, we are aiming to prepare a mid-term Roadmap on the achievement of SDGs, the definition of intermediate targets and indicators, and the development of a Vision 2030 national strategy. Engagement of all society layers- a pro-active Parliament, energetic civil society, resourceful academia, and responsive private sector are a priority in the SDG journey.
