

**Opening Statement—  
Regional Forum on Sustainable Development  
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On behalf of the Regional UN System in Europe and Central Asia, welcome to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

The Sustainable Development Goals set an ambitious vision for people and planet, and peace and justice for all. That vision will only be realized if strong partnerships are built and sustained.

The assessment<sup>1</sup> by the United Nations shows that the current pace of progress in some areas is insufficient to fully meet the ambition of the 2030 Agenda. But trends can be broken when societies mobilize around common goals; when political commitment and leadership for the achievement of clear targets are in place; when innovations move quickly from theory to practice; and when people have a say in and contribute to the implementation of agreed policies.

These annual inter-governmental meetings bringing together 56 Member States of the UNECE region with other development actors are therefore important opportunities for forging new partnerships, sharing experiences, and maintaining political commitment.

There is much to discuss. 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. The region is making progress in three key areas:

- elimination of extreme poverty;
- achieving overall high levels of human development; and
- fostering stronger economic growth trends.

But the question is how to ensure that this progress is sustained, and obstacles to further progress towards the SDGs are overcome. Let me touch upon five of the key challenges and opportunities, which are also the topics of the Round Table discussions during the next two days.

First, inequalities are rising<sup>2</sup> across the board. Inequality fuels exclusion, insecurity, instability, forced displacement, de-democratization, and sharply increases people’s vulnerability to the effects of climate change.

UN data shows for example:

- without inequalities in health, education and income, the world would have achieved 22 per cent more progress in human development<sup>3</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2018

(<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2018/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2018-EN.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> Globally: The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2018;

In ECA: UNDP Regional Human Development Report 2016 “Progress at Risk: Inequalities and Human Development in Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Central Asia”

<sup>3</sup> 2015 UNDP Human Development Report

- profound inequalities persist in access to land and other productive resources, as well as finance<sup>4</sup>;
- in the region, while life expectancy is increasing, the gap between the countries with the highest and lowest life expectancy is still more than a decade<sup>5</sup>.

The Europe and Central Asia region characterized by low fertility, population ageing and complex migration movements. Yet, though the forms of inequalities vary, they are generally connected with sex, age, ethnicity, and geographical residence of the individual. A woman belonging to an ethnic minority and who lives in a remote area is much more likely to be marginalised and 'left behind'. This woman and other people in similar circumstances should be the focus of our attention, political commitment, policy orientation, and technical support.

Second, while the region's economies are generally growing, this growth is largely not inclusive or sustainable.

Many economies in the region are still dependent on one or two core industries. Stronger efforts to green national economies would help ensure that growth is planet-friendly and create new industries and jobs.

Poverty remains a persistent challenge for the region's lower middle- and low-income countries. Rural populations are particularly vulnerable to poverty, having fewer employment opportunities and weaker social protection systems than urban residents<sup>6</sup>.

Labour market exclusion, employment and pay gaps between women and men also remain key challenges in many countries<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, the need to advance gender sensitive family policies emerged as a top priority during the last year Regional Conference on ICPD+25<sup>8</sup>. While unemployment rates in the region have fallen to some of their lowest levels in a decade, access to decent jobs remains a main cause of concern – particularly for women. According to ILO, over 34 per cent of women are working part time because of family-related responsibilities – more than double the share reported by men<sup>9</sup>.

My third point refers to education:

In most countries in Europe and Central Asia, SDG targets for universal primary education have already been achieved. Literacy rates are high, and gender gaps in primary and secondary education are small in the majority of countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) - evidence generated by the FAO studies in several countries of the region Albania, Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan

<sup>5</sup> World Health Statistics 2018, WHO <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272596/9789241565585-eng.pdf?ua=1> (France – 82.9; Turkmenistan – 68.2)

<sup>6</sup> FAO: "Average income per head is lower in rural areas than in urban areas, the skills base is narrower and the service sector less developed".

<sup>7</sup> International Labor Organization, World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends 2019 (pages 48-54): [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2019/WCMS\\_670542/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2019/WCMS_670542/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>8</sup> UNECE/UNFPA Regional Conference on ICPD+25 "Enabling Choices: Population Dynamics and Sustainable Development", 1-2 October 2018

<sup>9</sup> International Labor Organization, World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends 2019 (pages 48-54): [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2019/WCMS\\_670542/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2019/WCMS_670542/lang--en/index.htm)

However, access to quality education remains a challenge for the most marginalized communities, including children with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, or from the poorest households<sup>10</sup>.

Learning goes beyond the ability to read and perform simple arithmetic. It entails a range of cognitive, social and emotional skills needed to lead productive and healthy lives. Rapidly transforming economies associated with less stable employment relationships and ageing societies will need new thinking and policy approaches. Collective efforts will need to focus on:

- early childhood education as the key foundation for children's development;
- continuing education for young people through access to higher, and technical and vocational education and training;
- creating more and better learning opportunities for low-skilled adults, to help them upgrade and adjust their skills to meet modern job market requirements, including through functional literacy; and finally
- we need to reinvent social welfare systems to meet the needs of the next generation.

Fourth, no country will be able to sustain growth or ensure the well-being of its people if it does not proactively manage risks posed by climate change. Tackling climate change must be central to all our efforts to reduce poverty and sustain development. Not taking action will guarantee that decades of hard-won development gains will be undone.

Fifth, peaceful, just and inclusive societies are typically preconditions for addressing the issues I just highlighted. Goal sixteen can help to accelerate the implementation of all other Sustainable Development Goals.

In many countries around the world, including in Europe and Central Asia, current trends include the risk of conflicts and lack of personal safety, inadequate institutional capacity for service delivery, while human rights are under pressure. Changing these trends and achieving sustainable development requires further global and regional efforts.

To conclude.

Sustainable development challenges are too many and too complex for any one actor to tackle alone. Progress on the 2030 Agenda, therefore, requires collaboration at all levels. We need to build new models of partnership, joining people and organizations across society, and across the private and public sector.

In this regard, I am pleased that the United Nations system in the region is collaborating exceptionally well. We are collectively dedicated to helping all countries achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Thank you very much for your commitment, engagement, and participation in this Regional Forum.

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<sup>10</sup> UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, Venice