

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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Geneva, 5 October 2020

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Informal document No. 2020/42

**Information update on the
state of preparation of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission**

Update on the state of preparations of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission

Note by the Secretariat

The secretariat is pleased to provide the Executive Committee (EXCOM) with an update on the state of preparations of the sixty-ninth Commission session and proposals for further consideration by the membership.

The note elaborates possible focus areas of the cross-cutting theme for the high-level segment of the 69th Commission session, “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”, that EXCOM adopted at its 109th meeting, held on 17 February 2020. It indicates focus areas for further programme development and potential draft decision items for consideration by the Commission.

In response to queries from interested delegations, the document also contains information that may help to guide the formulation of voluntary national pledges to promote circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources.

1. Proposed programme elements

1. The 69th session will be held on 20 – 21 April 2021, combining a thematic high-level segment on the first day and a general segment on other areas of work of the Commission on the second day.

20 April 2021	
Opening and adoption of the agenda	
High-level segment: “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”	
10.00 - 13.00 15:00 – 18.00	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High-level dialogue 2. Panel discussions on strengthening circularity and sustainable use of natural resources 3. Consideration of the high-level statement
21 April 2021	
General segment	
10.00 - 13.00 15:00 – 18.00	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Report on activities on the high-level theme of the 68th Commission “Smart Sustainable Cities: Drivers for Sustainable Development” 5. Report on activities of the Executive Committee 6. Other issues calling for decision by the Commission 7. Election of officers 8. Other business 9. Adoption of the report of the session

2. In the high level segment, during the morning session on 20 April, the high-level dialogue, to be held at the level of ministers and deputy ministers, will discuss trends from the UNECE region and will include an exchange of experiences from the membership on its work towards promoting circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources. Delegations are invited to present their voluntary national pledges (see Section 6 below).

3. During the afternoon session of 20 April, the Commission will explore specific areas where UNECE instruments can support member States in strengthening their circular and sustainable practices in the use of natural resources. This will include existing tools (for reference see Annex to [Informal Document 2020/38](#)) as well as areas where UNECE activity could be concentrated further on aspects in support of the high-level theme. In particular, the meeting will consider ways and means on how UNECE work could be deepened to accelerate progress, e.g. where needs-based and demand-driven tools and instruments could be replicated, upscaled or complemented for greater results. Focus areas will be

- i. regulatory frameworks and normative instruments that could be strengthened;
- ii. ways to leverage the role of UNECE as a platform for joint action, and
- iii. capacity-building through technical assistance.

The role of the private sector as a driver for positive change will also be explored.

4. In the general segment on 21 April, the Commission will deliberate on a number of standing agenda items, including

- **Report of the activities of the Executive Committee.** In 2021, it is expected that in addition to the substantive issues, a special focus would also be placed on a further consideration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on programme delivery, business readiness, and working methods of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies.
- Further, the session will consider **Other issues calling for decision by the Commission.**
- For the item “**Election of the Bureau**”, member States are invited to nominate candidates for the positions of Chair and two Vice-Chairs (see Rules of Procedure of the Commission (E/ECE/778/Rev.5), Chapter IV, Rule 12).
- A proposed new addition to the programme could be a dedicated agenda item on the **activities on the high-level theme of the previous Commission session**. If agreed, this would allow the membership to take stock of the impact of the earlier discussions and actions taken. For the 2019 session, the high-level theme was “Smart Sustainable Cities: Drivers for Sustainable Development”.

5. At its 110th meeting, EXCOM requested the UNECE secretariat to include its COVID-19 response into further programme planning for the sixty-ninth session of the Commission. In discussing the high-level theme and the work of the Commission, the secretariat will duly consider the three overarching pillars of its pandemic response strategy, namely to i) Facilitate connectivity; ii) Address transboundary and other risks; and Support a green and resilient recovery. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will also be addressed under the agenda item “Report of the activities of the Executive Committee”.

2. Focus areas in UNECE's work on promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources

6. The issues of circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the region have been prominent in UNECE's work for many years. Following the invitation by EXCOM to "relevant subsidiary bodies of UNECE and the secretariat to consider how they may contribute, as appropriate, to the cross-cutting theme of the 69th Commission session within their respective mandates, ongoing work and existing resources, and while making full use of the existing nexuses", the high-level theme has been examined in detail.

7. A stocktake of key UNECE activities related to the theme of the high-level segment of the sixty-ninth Commission session, was presented to EXCOM in July 2020 in the annex of the [Informal document No. 2020/38](#).

8. Priorities, as well as gaps and potential obstacles to progress were identified, and actions were studied that could serve as catalysts for further progress and could inform possible decisions by the Commission.

9. The following aspects are proposed for further consideration in formulating a more detailed agenda for the Commission and, subject to available resources, may be reflected in future Programmes of Work in support of promoting circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in UNECE's activities:

a) Environment: The Environment subprogramme provides regional support to member States on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Key initiatives with relevance to the high-level theme include the Environment for Europe (EfE) process; Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs); enhanced environmental monitoring, assessment and reporting; UNECE Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs); Education for Sustainable Development; the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Program; and the European Environment and Health process.

In addition to these longstanding activities, special focus areas for further action could be

- i. the broad application of the principles of green and circular economy, as well as the sustainable use and management of natural resources;
- ii. formulating inputs to the Ninth EfE Ministerial Conference, planned to be held in Cyprus in 2022, that includes the themes "Applying principles of circular economy to sustainable tourism" and "Greening the economy in the pan-European region: working towards sustainable infrastructure";
- iii. assisting member States in producing and ensuring the availability of UNECE Environmental Indicators and other indicator frameworks relevant for measuring and monitoring a circular economy.

b) Transport: The Sustainable Transport subprogramme, through its normative and policy work, as well as analytical and capacity-building activities on sustainable transport contributes considerably to key aspects of the regional and global economy by creating the desired "loop" that optimizes the use of resources in a circular economy.

All four pillars of the Inland Transport Committee (ITC) Strategy until 2030, adopted by the Committee at its 82nd session (ECE/TRANS/288/Add.2), include elements of the circular economy, and help to accelerate the transition to sustainable inland transport

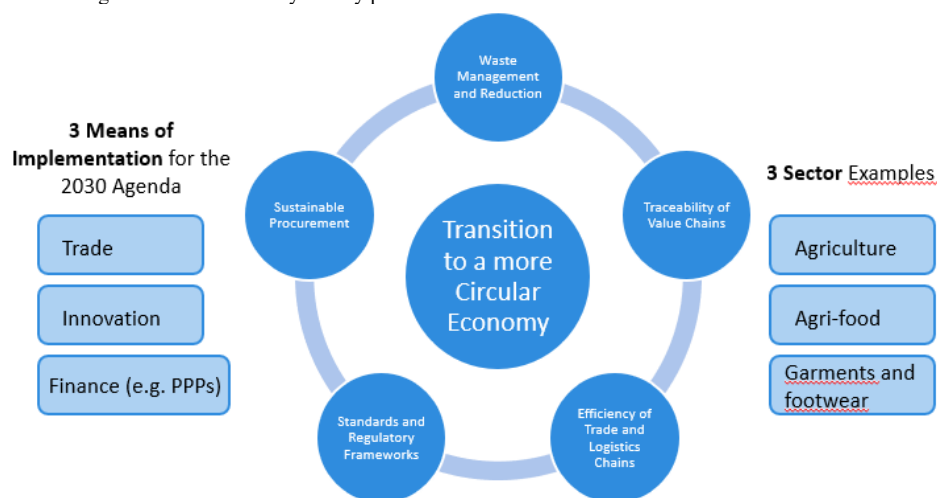
- i. The first pillar on enhancing the role of ITC as the UN platform for inland transport Conventions covers, for example the circular nature of vehicle regulations.
- ii. The second pillar on supporting new technologies and innovations in inland transport focuses on the digitalisation aspects necessary also to reduce waste.
- iii. The third pillar on regional and interregional policy dialogue has and will focus on a number of issues relevant to the circular economy.
- iv. The fourth pillar on promoting sustainable regional and interregional connectivity and mobility is where the above-mentioned actions on circular economy will come together through the promotion of green transport connectivity and mobility.



- c) **Statistics:** To ensure relevant policy decisions related circular economy and its measurement, it is essential that common concepts and frameworks be developed at the international level. Countries have started measuring selected aspects of circular economy and international organizations have initiated important methodological work in this area. However, there is no single or internationally agreed upon definition of a circular economy and what key statistics are needed to measure it. Building on its experience in areas relevant to the circular economy, UNECE could work together with other international organizations towards the development of a harmonised approach to measuring circular economy that would allow to meet the priority needs of related policies.
- d) **Economic Cooperation and Integration / Trade:** Given the transboundary nature of the circular economy, trade and economic cooperation are important levers to foster a broad and wide-spread transition to a circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources. Together with development cooperation, trade and economic integration can offer important opportunities for those countries, where the sensitization for and engagement with the circular economy paradigm are currently at an emerging stage. Through its Policy Recommendations, Standards, tools and knowledge-generation and capacity-building activities, the subprogrammes on Economic Cooperation and Integration and the one on Trade can make, in line with their current mandates, substantial contributions towards advancing circularity and the sustainable use of natural resources by
 - i. Transforming production processes in sectors that are particularly resource intensive, including by fostering traceability of value chains;
 - ii. Integrating circularity principles into public procurement criteria;

- iii. Fostering reduction and reuse of waste;
- iv. Harnessing the powers of standards and regulatory cooperation; and
- v. Using new technologies to makes trade and logistics chains more efficient.

Transitioning to a circular economy – entry points for the Economic and Trade Division



- e) **Sustainable Energy:** The subprogramme on Sustainable Energy is designed to improve access to affordable and clean energy for all and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the carbon footprint of the energy sector in the region. Key instruments to promote a circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources include the United Nations Framework Classification for Resources (UNFC) and the United Nations Resource Management System (UNRMS); UNECE’s High Performance Buildings Initiative and its Framework Guidelines for Energy Efficiency Standards in Buildings; Best practice guidelines for management of methane in extractive industries; and Recommendations on carbon capture and storage.

Focus areas for further work include

- i. elaborating efficient policies to deliver on circular economy through energy for sustainable development, including reforming subsidies and placing a real price on GHG emissions;
 - ii. expanding the roles of gases, including use of renewable gases, to reduce the carbon intensity of the energy system;
 - iii. supporting member States in achieving carbon neutrality as a first step on their pathways to sustainable energy;
 - iv. organising a high-level political dialogue among ECE member States to frame acceleration of the energy transition in support of the UN’s Decade of Action and the High-level Dialogue on Energy 2021;
- f) **Forestry and timber:** The subprogramme on Forestry and timber addresses questions of circular economy along the entire production chain of forest-derived goods and services, including the conservation and management of forest ecosystems. Forest products constitute a renewable resource that is particularly suitable to circularity approaches: though not always fully achieved, sustainable forest management is a goal aspired to by forest managers around the world; ecosystem services are increasingly recognized as important joint production possibilities in forest product chains; use of waste, particularly in energy production, is a common and long-standing practice throughout the wood products sector; and reuse and recycling, for example through lumber salvage and paper recycling, are likewise common practices.

The Warsaw Integrated Programme of Work includes several work areas related to circular concepts. Further action could focus on

- data collection and evaluation on sustainable use of forests and sustainable production, consumption and recycling of wood products to identify and address specific country needs;
- concerted action – where applicable across UNECE subprogrammes - in support of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration that aims to massively accelerate global restoration of degraded ecosystems in order to fight the climate heating crisis, enhance food security, provide clean water and protect biodiversity on the planet.

g) Housing, land management and population

Circularity is a concept that can be applied in and to urban areas, whereby the entire city ecosystem needs to limit its environmental footprint, and rely on circular cycles of production and consumption within city boundaries. Resilience implies the strengthening of city infrastructure and capacity to stand natural and human made shocks. Both circularity and resilience require a re-thinking of the urban fabric, with a different approach to policies and well as practice.

The subprogramme is partnering with the International Telecommunication Union and other UN agencies in the United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) Initiative. A recent focus area is the circular city implementation framework that is designed to improve circularity in cities and support stakeholders in implementing circular actions. UNECE’s Forum of Mayors will present good practices and approaches to addressing disasters using the circular cities approaches. For the Commission, a nexus approach to further strengthening circularity in cities will be explored that involves all relevant subprogrammes.

3. Documentation

10. To help frame the discussion and assist in the deliberations, the secretariat intends to prepare the following documentation for consideration at the sixty-ninth session:

69th session
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provisional Annotated Agenda • Report of the session
High-level segment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources: Trends and opportunities in the UNECE region. • UNECE Toolbox: Circular Economy and the sustainable use of natural resources (Background document on the cross-cutting theme, detailing a number of relevant UNECE activities and their impact).
General segment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report on activities on the high-level theme of the 68th Commission “Smart Sustainable Cities: Drivers for Sustainable Development”. • Report on activities of the Executive Committee. • Draft high-level statement and other issues calling for decisions by the Commission. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Evaluation of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. ○ Proposed timeline for future Commission planning.

4. High-level statement

11. As in previous years, the membership may wish to consider and adopt a high-level statement by the Commission. Elements for such a statement could include the following aspects:

Elements for the high-level statement

(preliminary list for comments and subsequent elaboration into a zero draft for further consideration)

- a. Addressing environmental pressures while ensuring economic prosperity -- an ongoing challenge for our region that is central to advancing sustainable development.
- b. Pledge for concerted action to promote circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources (reference to voluntary national pledges)
- c. COVID-19 response creates both urgency and opportunity for building back better and for transitioning to a greener economy and increased competitiveness, with appropriate risk management and increased resilience.
- d. Contributions of UNECE to fostering the circular economy and improving the sustainable use of natural resources (– with some sectoral details)
- e. Three core functions of UNECE – normative development, convening power and technical cooperation – can provide impetus.
 - Normative work can help to address regulatory gaps that slow progress.
 - Renewed efforts to engage multiple actors, both in the public and private sector, can help leverage best expertise available and develop effective action.
 - Strengthened international cooperation, incl. by enhancing technical cooperation, can facilitate adoption of norms and standards and access to policy advice.
- f. COVID-19 has shown the need for concerted action and multilateral solutions. Renewed commitment to international cooperation. As immediate needs are addressed, long-term impacts of actions should be considered; other pressing challenges must also be tackled – together, this will strengthen the foundations of sustainable development future.
- g. The pandemic is a reminder of the need to understand and address existing risks before they materialise – 2030 Agenda provides a vision to anticipate and tackle multiple risks, including transboundary ones.
- h. Regional cooperation has acquired an increased importance to manage risks, reduce uncertainty and foster economic dynamism. – The situation calls for solidarity and bridging the gaps that divide us. UNECE mandate for economic development and integration of the region is as relevant as ever.

At the request of the Chair, the secretariat will prepare a zero draft for further consideration by member States.

5. Issues for possible draft decisions (preliminary list for further consideration)

12. Over recent months, the secretariat has consulted broadly with the subsidiary architecture of UNECE, in particular the Bureaux of the sectoral committees and entities reporting directly to EXCOM, and the respective secretariats, to identify areas for concrete and measurable action in support of the high-level theme and other issues calling for a decision by the Commission. A preliminary list of decision items for further elaboration and consideration by the membership is presented below:

a. Further strengthen the Commission's work on circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources (subject to available resources).

1. **Acknowledge value/encourage further uptake of existing UNECE tools and instruments (see UNECE toolbox).**
2. **Call on Sectoral Committees and bodies reporting directly to EXCOM to develop proposals across Sectoral Committees on interconnected solutions that promote circularity and the sustainable use of natural resources that can facilitate attaining the objectives of the 2030 Agenda;**
3. **Request subsidiary UNECE bodies to consider how to enhance relevant UNECE normative instruments, incl. by proposing ways to fill governance/ good practices gaps**
4. **Request UNECE-wide contribution to overarching processes related to the high-level theme, e.g.**
 - Decade for Ecosystem Restoration
 - Decade for Action on the SDGs
 - Decade on Sustainable Energy for All
 - Environment for Europe (Batumi follow up/Cyprus preparations)
 - Building Back better (UN system COVID-19 response)

5. Strengthen work in support of greater circularity of cities

6. Measuring and Monitoring

Acknowledge importance of indicator frameworks relevant for measuring and monitoring a circular economy (incl. environmental indicators) and request secretariat to develop proposals for relevant statistical activities in this field.

7. Call on secretariat to deepen strategic partnerships related to circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources

(incl. with the UN system (Issues-based coalitions/bilateral); and with other international organizations).

8. Request periodic reporting on Circular Economy and the sustainable use of natural resources

(e.g. to 70th Commission and/ or in periodic Sectoral Committee reports)

b. UNECE COVID-19 response and related matters

- acknowledge value of UNECE instruments and action taken in response to the pandemic.
- encourage consideration of relevant follow on action in the respective Programmes of Work of UNECE architecture, including programmatic response and other matters related to strengthening of resilience, business continuity, working methods etc.

c. Extension of the mandate of the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development

d. Amendment to the UNECE Rules of Procedure (RoP):

The UNECE RoP do not currently specify an obligation for the secretariat to circulate budgetary implications of proposals put to the Commission for consideration. It is proposed to add language on this matter, as is already the case in the procedural documents of the other Regional Commissions.

e. Timeline for future Commission planning

The secretariat will develop a generic timeline that outlines a possible planning cycle for future Commission preparations that engages UNECE's subsidiary architecture and all subprogrammes in the process during the intersessional period and is guided by the Executive Committee.

At the request of the Chair, the secretariat will prepare a zero draft of "Other matters calling for the decision of the Commission" for further consideration by member States during informal consultations.

6. National voluntary commitments

13. In its meeting in July 2020, EXCOM encouraged the membership of UNECE to explore how they can contribute to the high-level theme of the sixty-ninth session, "Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region", and in particular to consider possible national commitments to strengthen circularity and sustainable practices at the country and transboundary level.

14. As a follow up, the Executive Secretary sent letters to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of UNECE member States encouraging governments to submit voluntary commitments aligned with the theme of the session. The below modalities are proposed to facilitate the formulation of such pledges:

a) Scope: The voluntary commitments should

- i. Focus on actions that are expected to enhance circularity and/or sustainable resource management, delivering clear environmental, economic and social benefits;
- ii. Make a clear contribution to the achievement of the targets under the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- iii. Have a measurable impact over time;
- iv. Be drivers for transformation and innovation and inspire other countries in the region.

As applicable, for the 17 programme countries, the voluntary pledges could also include reference to the UNECE assistance commitments under the respective UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) that are programmed for implementation in the next few years.

b) Pledge design: In formulating their commitment, delegations may wish to take into consideration the following aspects:

- **Time-bound and related to the SDGs:** Each voluntary commitment should include a time frame and milestones for the action, outline the expected benefits and impact and the SDG targets to which it would contribute. It should also include a measurable target, so that progress can be assessed and reported to the 70th Commission session in two years.
- **Linked to UNECE activities:** Governments are particularly encouraged to submit voluntary commitments that relate to enhanced uptake of relevant UNECE products. The UNECE Toolbox on the theme of the high-level segment of the 2020 Commission session may offer ideas on possible courses of action. As applicable, delegations may also wish to reference relevant voluntary actions under the Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E), in the context of the "Environment for Europe" process.
- **Contextualized with baseline and success criteria/measurable progress indicators:** The secretariat is ready to work with member States to determine at the beginning of the process how progress on the voluntary commitments can be assessed over time and establish a baseline of the status quo ante, in order to measure progress and benchmark positive advancements. Member States may wish to identify performance indicators that are routinely measured by relevant national authorities and demonstrate the impact of the commitment made and progress against a set baseline.

c) Periodic progress reporting:

- The voluntary commitments will be published on the UNECE webpage to publicize the pledge and update on its implementation and the impact achieved. Specifically,
 - Delegations will be invited to speak about their commitments at the Commission session during the high-level segment.
 - Periodically, member States will be invited to provide a status update by self-reporting against the agreed indicators. (If pledges relate to UNECE instruments, the secretariat may also contribute to the status updates, e.g. if the commitment involves accession to UNECE legal instruments).
 - The 70th session of the Commission will receive a progress report on action taken further to the high-level theme of the preceding session.
 - Additionally, there will be opportunities to showcase progress in different outreach activities such as side events, webinars etc. where member States can exchange experiences and speak to their approaches and lessons learned.

7. Timeline for further planning

October – December 2020: The secretariat is available to engage delegations bilaterally to solicit commitments to **national pledges** that are impactful and measurable. To allow for timely planning and related outreach activities, member States are encouraged to submit their pledges before the end of 2020. Later submissions can be entertained as needed.

October-November 2020: The secretariat will circulate to member States elements for the draft high-level statement, draft decisions for consideration by the Commission, and a provisional draft agenda for the sixty-ninth session by the Commission. These documents will be discussed and finalized in a **series of informal consultations**. The following timeslots have been reserved and will be confirmed closer to the respective dates:

19 October, 10.00 – 13.00
19 November 2020 (tbc)

December 2020: The 112th meeting of EXCOM (tentatively scheduled for 14 December 2020) is expected to **approve the provisional agenda of the Commission session, as well as the onward submission of the draft decisions for consideration by the Commission.** This will allow for these documents to be submitted to conference servicing for translation and processing within mandated processing deadlines. (Should further discussions be needed closer to the Commission date, related documentation will be made available to the session in English only.)

8. Next steps

EXCOM is invited to express its views on the content of this information note, in particular on

- **Focus areas for the further development of the provisional agenda;**
- **Elements of the high-level statement;**
- **Issues for possible draft decisions;**
- **Documentation for the session and the;**
- **Mechanism for voluntary national commitments.**

Delegations are invited to provide input to the draft high-level statement and to draft decisions for further consideration by the membership during the informal consultations. (Please submit your **inputs to the Secretary of the Commission, Ms. Nicola Koch, by 7 October 2020 under unece.excom@un.org**).