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COVID-19 crisis: impact, initial response

and further implications for UNECE work

Note by the Secretariat
COVID-19 crisis: impact, initial response and further implications for UNECE work

This document outlines some of the initial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in the UNECE region and the emergence of some policy themes that are of relevance to UNECE mandates. It introduces the main strategic orientation in UNECE's support to its member States in their response to the crisis, its broad capacities across key areas and how these have been deployed so far, placing special emphasis on transboundary aspects and regional collaboration. It also describes the operational difficulties created by the crisis, the challenges it poses for existing business models and operational arrangements, and the preliminary responses provided. Finally, it introduces some elements for further discussion and presents some proposals for the consideration of member States.

1. Impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the UNECE region

1.   The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the need for robust policy responses to reduce pressure on health systems, facilitate social distancing, mitigate economic disruption and, eventually, provide impetus for a sustainable recovery aligned with the 2030 Agenda. The impact on different parts of the region has varied depending on the timing of the initial outbreak, the economic and demographic structures and pre-existing capacities. Despite this diversity, one of the defining features of this crisis is that it has spared no country, while at the same time affecting the very fabric of international economic relations – trade and transport.

2.   The situation remains fluid and the long-lasting implications of the crisis cannot yet be fully grasped. However, a number of relevant policy themes have already emerged where UNECE can make significant contributions within its existing mandates.

3.   Some of these identifiable **policy themes** include:

- **Reducing the need for physical contact**: The avoidance or reduction of physical contact has been sought as an effective but, most often, costly way to arrest the spread of the pandemic. Instruments and initiatives that eliminate the need for or frequency of physical contact with limited or no cost have a critical value. Their use and acceptance are likely to outlast the crisis when they contribute to increased efficiency, as is the case of various electronic tools and organizational innovations related to trade and transport, or to policy targets in other areas, such as environment, when they reduce resource consumption.

- **Enhancing resilience and improving risk management:** The disruption created by the crisis has exposed different vulnerabilities to ongoing shocks, which has questioned previous assumptions on reliability of supply lines and reaction capacities. The unprecedent situation is making risk a more central concept in decision-making at different levels. It is enhancing the relevance of instruments and frameworks that seek to mitigate or avoid various sources of risk. It is also increasing interest in approaches that increase resilience by reducing resource use, such as the circular economy.

- **Building back better:** The immediate policy responses aimed to address the health emergency and provide income support to offset the socioeconomic impact of lockdowns. However, as the emphasis is shifting now to the promotion of a strong recovery, the stimulus packages provide an opportunity to address climate change and other environmental concerns, and, more generally, advance the 2030 Agenda. In this spirit, the UN Secretary-General has proposed six climate-related actions to shape the recovery.

2. Supporting member States response to COVID-19: some strategic considerations

4.   UNECE has been stepping up its support to member States to confront this difficult situation. It will continue to closely engage with them to mitigate the impacts of the crisis and facilitate the recovery.

5.   The strategic considerations that will guide this support include:
- Ensure that the COVID-19 response is well aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and contributes to the progress of the SDGs
- Engage, as required, all the different UNECE functions and assets, including its convening power, normative production and technical cooperation
- Draw on areas of core strengths and leverage existing expertise of UNECE and its partners, including, in particular, the UN regional system
- Increase the impact and resilience of UNECE activities through the use of virtual tools to complement existing engagement modalities.

6.   These broad principles can be translated into a number of concrete actions:

- Review and repurpose, to the extent possible, existing activities to meet COVID-19 needs
- Engage UNECE's intergovernmental architecture, especially at the sectoral committee level, as platforms that involve its full membership, to consider changes in the programme of work, as needed, to reflect new needs and priorities
- Enhance the coherence and effectiveness of UNECE activities by exploiting cross-sectoral synergies and building on the nexus approach
- Identify evolving demands for support and ensure the coherence of UN offerings through closer engagement with UN country teams
- Exploit emerging funding possibilities, including by strengthening existing partnerships and developing new ones
- Review existing operational arrangements for the conduct of different types of activities and assess the scope and resource implications for the use of virtual tools

7.   The significance of these principles and actions will vary over time. As the focus of policy interventions moves from an emergency response to a recovery that reconnects the region and builds solid foundations to further advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the scope for UNECE involvement and the relevance of its offerings for all its member States will increase.

3. UNECE capacities to respond to the COVID-19 crisis

a. UNECE range of instruments

8.   UNECE has a large number of instrument and initiatives developed under its different subprogrammes that can support member States in their efforts to tackle the crisis and promote a sustainable recovery. They can be grouped into three pillars, which define broad policy goals that address emerging policy concerns on the COVID-19 response and recovery:
- Facilitate connectivity
- Address transboundary and other risks
- Support a green and resilient recovery

The below schematic representation captures some key work streams that, within existing mandates, can make a contribution to tackle various COVID-19 policy needs and are interconnected. More specific UNECE offerings can be attributed to each area.

UNECE Action Framework for Responses to the COVID-19 crisis

Facilitate connectivity	Address transboundary and other risks	Support a green and resilient recovery
•Enhance cooperation and implementation of a harmonized regulatory framework for border crossing •Promote digital implementation of existing legal transport instruments •Facilitate trade through the exchange of electronic information	•Promote the use of existing multilateral environmental agreements to deal with various risks. •Foster transparency, traceability and risk management through the use of standards • Promote and enhance statistical frameworks to improve the basis for decision-making, including in relation to disasters	•Enhance resilience and efficiency through improved resource use, including through circular economy approaches •Address the implication of the crisis in urban centers and engage cities as drivers of the recovery •Promote sustainable infrastructure, including through private sector participation

9.   The inventory of UNECE instruments circulated earlier[1] provides a detailed account of the various UNECE offerings, which can be used for immediate and, mostly, medium and long-term responses to the COVID-19 crisis. This inventory contains three types of initiatives and instruments that:
- Were launched as a **direct and immediate response to emerging needs**, such as the Observatory on Border Crossings Status and the Platform for National Statistical Offices.
- **Pre-existed and are directly relevant to existing policy challenges**, such as the UN/CEFACT dematerialization approach and related tools.
- Are being **adapted to meet new demands**, as the Forum of Mayors 2020, which will cover now a new topic: cities resilience in the face of the COVID-19 crisis.

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[1] Remote informal meeting of EXCOM, 20 May 2020.

However, this is not a fixed picture and the inventory is regularly updated with new items. Within existing mandates, UNECE will strive to develop new activities and adapt existing ones to meet the changing needs of its member States.

b. New and enhanced forms of engagement

10.   UNECE has engaged with different partners to better understand and address the specific pandemic-related needs of its member States. Through this ongoing dialogue, UNECE has also increased awareness for its various offerings among potential partners and beneficiaries.

11.   This engagement is taking place at different levels and through various channels:

- At the country level, UNECE participates in the **meetings of the socioeconomic taskforces in various programme countries**. In many instances, the Executive Secretary has personally been involved in these meetings, introducing relevant UNECE initiatives and providing a regional context for country actions. Working with UN Country Teams, UNECE has provided contributions to response plans to the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in six countries[2], identifying specific activities and products. More submissions will follow, as this this is an ongoing process where UNECE expects to provide contributions to all programme countries.

- The **UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19**[3] constitutes an integrated support package offered by the United Nations Development System. The response is undertaken under the leadership of the UN Resident Coordinators, with the support of UNDP as technical lead, while relying on the engagement of resident and non-resident UN entities.[4] The socio-economic response framework includes five streams of work current and potential contributions fall mostly under pillar 4 (macroeconomic response and multilateral collaboration) but also concern pillar 3 (protecting jobs and economic recovery) and pillar 5 (social cohesion and community resilience) of the framework.

- At the regional level, UNECE has led and co-organised **additional extraordinary meetings of the Regional UN System** every 2 - 3 weeks since April 2020. The calls have focused on different aspects of the regional COVID-19 response, in particular the contributions of the Issue based coalitions (IBCs). Two meetings included a subregional focus – on Central Asia and the Western Balkans - to facilitate policy discussions around common problems and appropriately reflect specific transboundary aspects.

- **Issue-based coalitions** (IBCs)[5] are used as the main vehicles to provide regional-level support and guidance on COVID-19 to the UN country teams. IBCs are regional inter-agency

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[2] Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Serbia and Uzbekistan.

[3] The Framework puts into practice the UN Secretary-General's Report Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the Socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, March 2020.

[4] This response has a horizon of 12-18 months. In addition, and not directly related to COVID-19, UNECE is providing support to the formulation of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework in 11 rollout countries for the 2021-2025 cycle.

[5] There are seven IBCs on the following issues: Health and Well-Being; Gender Equality; Social Protection; Large

taskforces, clustered around cross-cutting policy issues. They facilitate concerted action between different UN agencies and partners on the operational level. All IBCs have aligned their activities to meet the needs and expectations at the country level and contribute to the COVID-19 response in various ways, through policy briefs, assessment tools and inputs to socio-economic impact assessments.

Having well-established IBCs in place is a comparative strength of the UNECE region that facilitates an effective and coherent response to the ongoing crisis. UNECE participates in or co-leads various IBCs including the recently established on environment and climate change.

- At the global level, UNECE has contributed to different reports and initiatives related to the COVID-19 response, including the **UN Secretary-General's Report Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the Socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, March 2020** and the **UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19**, in coordination with other regional commissions. It is also engaged in the preparations of the 2020 High-level Political Forum, which will address the implications of the COVID-19 crisis.

c. Funding

12. In order to support its member States, UNECE has actively sought access to new resources established to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in programme countries. UNECE participates in four of out the five short-term projects addressing the impact of COVID-19 funded from the **UN Development Account**. The projects will be implemented together with the other regional commissions and additional partners from the UN development system. They concern key areas of UNECE expertise: trade and transport connectivity; social protection (statistics and gender); urban recovery and resilience building and support to medium and small enterprises (MSMEs). In the first phase of the projects, funding received by UNECE will account for around 15 per cent of the total funding made available for all participating agencies.

13. In addition to these new initiatives, work under existing financing streams supporting technical cooperation has been adapted to the new circumstances. Seven **existing UNDA projects** (10 and 11 tranches) are being adjusted to integrate a COVID-19 component. Revised workplans have been developed under the **Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation** to incorporate activities addressing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

14. UNECE will also explore the development of projects to be funded under the **UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund** under Window 3: Recover Better. The Fund offers a common financing mechanism for a cohesive UN System response to country needs that encourages joint projects, which are submitted by Resident Coordinators.

d. The value of a nexus approach

15. The strengthened engagement of UNECE at the country level, the participation in regional policy discussions and the potential access to additional resources has been facilitated by earlier

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Movements of People; Adolescents and Youth; Environment and Climate Change; Sustainable Food Systems. In addition, there is a regional coordination group on data and statistics and a group on digital transformation.

changes in working methods. The <u>nexus approach</u>[6] and the formation of cross-disciplinary teams in UNECE across four high-impact areas (sustainable use of natural resources; sustainable and smart cities for all; sustainable mobility and smart connectivity and measuring and monitoring SDGs) facilitates a more effective exchange on the demands of different partners and respond to them in a more integrated and cohesive way.

16.   This cross-sectoral perspective is also being incorporated into the work of regional advisors who, besides their sectoral expertise, are now also tasked to inform potential beneficiaries of relevant UNECE offerings in other areas. This will allow them to introduce overall UNECE work at the country level more comprehensively. Such an organization-wide perspective is being made possible by enhanced internal coordination mechanisms and improved knowledge management systems that have been set up earlier.

4. Operational impact of COVID-19 on the activities of UNECE

17.   The disruptions created by COVID-19 has also affected ongoing UNECE activities and challenged established working methods:

- In the period from mid-March to 8 June 2020, all physical meetings at the Palais des Nations were suspended by UNOG. Under UNECE's **revised calendar of official meetings** 62 of 126 originally programmed meeting were cancelled, 45 postponed and 19 delivered online. UNECE has been a pioneer in embracing virtual practices, e.g. the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region was held virtually less than a week after the host country enacted its prevention measures. However, many mandated activities had to be deferred and meeting agendas limited to business-critical items or adjusted to virtual meeting formats.

- Throughout the crisis, UNOG's Conference services have explored technical solutions to provide **remote interpretation**. As of early June, a limited number of official meetings can be serviced but continuing capacity reductions (due to reduced room availability and decreased interpretation quotas because of social distancing arrangements) have been advised for the coming months, subject to host country requirements.

- **Travel restrictions** had a negative impact on capacity building activities, which had to be postponed or cancelled or, in a few cases, held virtually. In the first five months of the year, overall staff travel, which is closely related to technical cooperation, was only 28% of the annual planned level, against 41% expected.

- UNECE staff has been working in **home office** since 17 March 2020, following guidance by the WHO and UNOG in line with the regulations introduced by the host country. Only as of 8th June 2020, with the gradual relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions, work on the Palais has partially resumed.

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[6] Main directions of UNECE ongoing work on further SDG alignment, see EXCOM Informal document No. 2018/12.

- All these constraints brought about a sharp **uptake of virtual forms of communication**, both for internal meetings among secretariat staff and consultations with member State representatives [7] UNECE staff followed a steep learning curve to embrace virtual communication formats and good practice. To share this knowledge, various internal communication channels were used to facilitate peer learning.

- Member States adopted **Special procedures** to enable remote informal meetings and authorize modalities to present business critical decisions for approval through silence procedure. This was required to ensure business continuity of the intergovernmental process[8].

18.   Despite the adverse circumstances and thanks to the flexibility shown by delegations and UNECE staff, the use of various virtual solutions and the commitment of the experts associated to UNECE, significant parts of the Programme of Work could be advanced. There were also some positive aspects, as virtual formats allowed for broader participations and facilitated new forms of interaction and content-sharing.

19.   However, concerns regarding the limitations of these temporary arrangements are widely shared. The value added of UNECE's role as a convening platform cannot be fully exercised in the virtual realm. Especially protracted negotiations and strategic policy discussions need the proximity of exchanges in a physical setting. Virtual meetings are unable to replicate the quality of human interaction in physical meetings for knowledge-sharing and network building.

5. For further consideration: Possible future implications for the work of UNECE

20.   The COVID-19 crisis has created a fluid and unprecedented situation. A sustained and effective organizational response requires drawing lessons from initial interventions and an active dialogue among the membership to understand evolving needs and shape demand-driven future action.

a. Within its existing mandates, UNECE launched new initiatives and offered its existing instruments to contribute to the efforts to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic. As the emphasis shifts towards "building back better" and aligning recovery efforts with the 2030 Agenda, the role of the UNECE in re-connecting the region and the scope for the use of its products, will increase.

> **UNECE sectoral committees could discuss how to reflect into their programmes of work a COVID-19 response to effectively support member States in the medium- and long-term and present their recommendations to EXCOM for consideration.** (These discussions have already started in some intergovernmental

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[7]UNECE held 458 WebEx meetings since 16 March (391 of which included external stakeholders and 67 were internal).

[8] EXCOM adopted special procedures for the adoption of its decisions and conduct meetings on 6th April (valid through April – May), which were extended on 29th May (through end July). On 29th May, it approved the arrangements for various subsidiary bodies to conduct business remotely during the COVID-19 period.

groups, for example, in transport.)

b. Regional cooperation must be an important component of the overall response to the crisis, including by addressing transboundary risks and facilitating connectivity. UNECE provides a platform to discuss how to enhance the regional contributions to the crisis response in practical ways. These discussions would take place in a context in which the importance of the regions in international economic relations is likely to grow. This increased relevance of regional factors is one of the potential long-lasting implications of the COVID-19, driven by resilience concerns, a desire to shorten and simplify supply lines and risk management considerations.

> **The forthcoming sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe could provide an opportunity to consider the role of regional cooperation in the new context and further assess the responses to the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, given the planned thematic focus of the high-level segment, discussions could include the potential contribution of the circular economy to increasing resilience.**

c. UNECE has stepped up its efforts to engage at the country level while co-leading the policy discussions on the response of the regional UN System to the unfolding crisis and connecting with global discussions and networks. In doing this, it has contributed to ensure the consistency of actions that is the objective of the reform of the UN Development System, while enhancing the profile of the work of UNECE at different levels.

> **As in the past, UNECE will strive to develop working methods and organisational arrangements that facilitate this enhanced engagement at the country level and with the UN Regional System, subject to available resources.**

d. Ad hoc responses to the operational constraints have ensured business continuity but were not able to ensure delivery on all initially programmed activities during the acute crisis. However, they have opened new perspectives on how to increase the ~~out~~reach of UNECE work, tap into new ways of working and strengthen collaboration, both internally and with other partners. These positive aspects should be incorporated when designing and planning future activities.

> **At the request of member States, the secretariat could review existing meeting formats and servicing arrangements, including for capacity-building activities, to determine an effective mix of virtual consultations, hybrid meetings and in person meetings. Such a review should include business continuity and risk management considerations and identify resource implications, including for ICT capacity if virtual engagement becomes a more prominent engagement channel.**

Draft decisions for consideration by EXCOM

The Executive Committee

- **Takes note of informal document 2020/37 containing information on the COVID-19 crisis: impact, initial response and further implications for UNECE work;**

- **Invites relevant subsidiary bodies of the Commission to discuss how to reflect a COVID-19 response that supports further progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in their Programmes of Work and requests the secretariat to present an overview of these recommendations to EXCOM for consideration.**

- **Requests the UNECE secretariat to include its COVID-19 response into further programme planning for the sixty-ninth session of the Commission.**

- **Welcomes the efforts by the UNECE secretariat to step up its engagement at the country level and within the regional UN system in the context of the COVID-19 response and its commitment to develop working methods and organisational arrangements that facilitate this enhanced engagement, subject to available resources.**

- **Requests the UNECE secretariat to present a proposal for an extrabudgetary project on a review of existing meeting formats and servicing arrangements, including for capacity-building activities, drawing on the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis, to EXCOM for consideration.**

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