

Webinar for the Parliaments of the UNECE Region

9 March 2020

14:30 - +6:00 CET (Geneva)

The Impact of COVID-19 on SDG Implementation in the UNECE Region:
What Role for Parliaments?

Opening remarks by Ms. Olga Algayerova,
UNECE Executive Secretary

Secretary General of IPU, Mr. Martin Chungong,
Excellencies,
Members of Parliament,
Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you today to this regional webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation in the UNECE region and the role of parliaments.

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, global progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals was too slow. This is why back in 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General launched the Decade of Action for the SDGs, calling on everyone, everywhere to mobilize and increase efforts for sustainable solutions of the world's biggest challenges: ranging from poverty and gender to climate change, inequality and closing the finance gap.

In our region, in the 56 UNECE member States in North America, Europe and Central Asia SDG progress had also been mixed.

(You will hear more details on the regional status of SDG implementation later in this webinar from Andres Vikat from the UNECE Statistics Division.)

Now COVID-19 is threatening to even reverse the modest progress achieved.

With over 26 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 580,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths in 2020 in the region, the pandemic has affected and continues to affect the lives and health of many people and has put health systems under extreme pressure.

The imposed lockdowns, mobility restrictions and sanitary measures continue to cause a dramatic worsening of the socio-economic situation with large implications for household incomes and employment, leading to further rising inequality.

Overall, the pandemic and its socio-economic impact have exposed pre-existing weaknesses and systemic inequalities and worsened trends in a number of critical areas for sustainable development:

Poverty, gender equality, social protection, education, digital access, food security, trade.

Some environmental pressures have abated because of lower economic activity. But this is a temporary respite that does not reflect policy or structural changes.

The acute phase of the pandemic is far from over, and the limited availability and unequal distribution of vaccines poses new challenges. Recovering from this crisis will be a continuing challenge for the foreseeable future.

However, to quote Albert Einstein, “in the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity.”

Measures taken in response to COVID-19 can even accelerate SDG progress if we get them right, and this is where you, the members of parliaments, have a unique role.

First of all, as the direct and elected representatives of the people, you can ensure that all their voices are heard by the political decision-makers.

Second, you can propose legislation.

And third, you exercise oversight and control functions on the government and on its ability to implement COVID-related new laws and measures.

Countries' COVID-19 economic stimulus packages present an opportunity not to go back to the old 'normal', but to recover better. Fiscal stimuli and increased public spending associated with the COVID-19 response can make a significant contribution to advancing sustainable development, provided they include incentives, conditions and measures that incentivize green investments, promote healthy ecosystems and reduce environmental stresses.

You can also work to ensure that the needs of those hit hardest by the pandemic are addressed in the recovery programmes, preventing a further increase in inequalities.

The multi-faceted crisis has also shown the importance of international cooperation. No one country can solve the enormous challenges on its own. At the regional level, UNECE's normative work helps or member States to translate SDGs into norms, standards and guidelines that contribute to shaping recovery measures aligned with the 2030 Agenda in the various sectors in which we are active, including transport, trade, gender, environment, housing, energy and forest management.

Ultimately, recovering better means moving away from the current linear economic model towards a circular economy that contributes to the sustainable management of natural resources and can help to shape a more resilient, prosperous and sustainable future for all.

I call on you to help shaping this future.

I wish you interesting and fruitful discussions.