

Opening Remarks

Francisco André

Co-Chair of the RFSD 2021

Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Portugal

Excellencies,

My distinguished Co-Chair, State Counsellor Lászlo Borbély,

Executive Secretary,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and privilege to open this year's Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

Welcome to all of you, wherever you may be connected from. Greetings from Lisbon, from where I am addressing you today.

It marks one year since the outbreak of COVID-19 has escalated into a pandemic. The past year has been clouded by the impact of this crisis.

The pandemic has slowed down, halted or – in many cases – reversed progress towards sustainable development.

Our challenge is to find ways to tackle the current health and socio-economic crisis without compromising on the transformative approach enshrined in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

As the roll-out of vaccination programs in the region is providing us with a perspective to eventually overcome the pandemic, it is very timely to gather today and tomorrow and share our views on how to respond to the pressing policy questions we are facing:

- How can we recover from the pandemic in a sustainable manner?*
- How do we build back – or actually build forward – better?*
- What are the experiences and lessons so far from governments and other actors?*
- And what are the opportunities arising from the COVID-19 recovery that we can build on to accelerate SDG progress and scale up action?*

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor for me and my country, Portugal, to co-chair this meeting, together with Mr. Lászlo Borbély, State Counsellor to the Prime Minister of Romania, particularly as Portugal has the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Allow me also to express my sincere appreciation to the UNECE members for their kind invitation and trust.

In Portugal, like all over the world, COVID-19 has been a disrupter of healthcare, and other social and economic systems, impacting in most, if not all, the SDGs.

Besides the negative impact on SDG 3 “Good Health and Well-Being”, the lockdown and extraordinary measures taken by governments to save lives were a serious setback for the economic growth and the economy of many families, in Portugal and in many countries.

The negative impacts affected disproportionately women and girls and those in more vulnerable situations.

However, the crisis caused by the pandemic should not be an excuse to interrupt policies, but rather an opportunity to reaffirm our commitments, including implementing the SDGs.

During this crisis, Portugal has decided to extend the access to the National Health Service to all migrants and refugees, regardless of their situation and legal status, under the same conditions as for national citizens. We have also granted temporary extension of documents and visas to enable their stay in Portugal – just to name a few examples of very concrete measures we put in place aiming to leave no one behind.

During our Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we also intend to raise the level of ambition regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Thus, the Presidency is preparing EU Council conclusions aiming to accelerate the realization of the SDGs.

Moreover, Portugal is prioritizing initiatives that help to accelerate the digital transition as a driver of economic recovery and is promoting European leadership in digital innovation, digitalization and sustainable management of natural resources, efforts that will positively impact on SDGs.

Allow me to detail a few elements.

We are working to promote a sustainable, innovative and resilient recovery boosted by the green and digital transitions.

To this end, we prioritise implementing the European Green Deal and the commitments to reduce emissions in the fight against climate change, and strengthening the energy transition, sustainable mobility and the blue (ocean) economy.

Also, we aim to focus in the modernisation of local government, highlighting the role of digitalization in developing ‘smart cities’.

We will organise a High-level Conference on Recovery, in June, to discuss the economic and financial situation, taking into account the national recovery and resilience plans.

Our Presidency emphasises the European Pillar of Social Rights as a response to the social dimension of the crisis and a way to strengthen the European social model and its capacity to keep pace with climate, digital and demographic changes. In this framework, Portugal will organize, on May 7th, in Oporto, the Social Summit, with the objective to focus on how to strengthen Europe's social dimension to meet the challenges of climate change and the digital transition, in order to ensure equal opportunities for all and that no one is left behind.

We will support the strengthening of the capacities to respond to public health crises and efforts to produce and distribute safe vaccines accessible, both in Europe and in the rest of the world.

Still on the social dimension of sustainable development, the Presidency will organise a high-level meeting on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, in April, to discuss the new European Disability Strategy 2021-2030.

We are also paying particular attention to the establishment of a European cooperation platform to strengthen the role of the EU in the fight against homelessness. In that regard, Lisbon will host in June a high-level conference on homeless people.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Despite the challenges of 2020 and the ones ahead, the 2030 Agenda and the need to achieve the SDGs is more important now than ever before.

COVID-19 has demonstrated the need to diversify and strengthen the resilience and sustainability of our strategies to improve health and education; reduce inequality; and spur economic growth – all while tackling the challenges of climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

The theme of our UNECE Regional Forum calls for cooperation and resilience to recover from the ongoing crisis.

We must act together for a better, greener, and fairer recovery, leaving no one behind.

In fact, over the past week, thousands of participants engaged in 12 peer learning tables and more than 20 side events around the themes of People (SDG 1, 2 and 3), Prosperity (SDG 8 and 10) and Planet (SDG 12 and 13).

This pandemic has shown that much depends on public policy and policy choices.

The Regional Forum aspires to be a place that supports you in identifying and developing the policies that make a difference in your specific situation and context.

To that end, I invite all speakers to share ideas, best practices, and challenges in the implementation of the SDG's, with the final aim of a sustainable recovery and determined to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

I thank you in advance for your valuable contributions, and wish you all a good and an enriching meeting - as virtual as it may be!

With this, I invite my distinguished Co-Chair, State Counsellor László Borbely, to make his opening remarks.