



**Closing remarks by Ms. Tatiana Valovaya
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva**

**Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region
Thursday, 18 March 2021, 11:40**

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure to join you today to mark the closing of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region. The Forum has become the key platform for multistakeholder discussions on sustainable development in our region and there is no doubt about its tremendous importance this year.

The situation is indeed urgent. Our planet is facing a tsunami of suffering triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also more than one year into the ‘Decade of Action’, during which world leaders pledged to mobilize for the financing and implementation of the SDGs. Unfortunately, as we take stock of the progress, the picture appears at best mixed.

In the UNECE region, environmental pressures persist. By the end of this century, global temperatures are projected to rise by up to 3.2 degrees Celsius. Nevertheless, UNECE estimates that fossil fuels will still represent over 50% of the region’s energy mix in 2050. While inequalities, within and between UNECE Member States, were already prevalent before the pandemic, COVID-19 additionally widened this gap. It also wreaked havoc on areas ranging from employment and economic growth to mental health, with particularly severe effects on gender equality and youth employment.

These facts paint a grim picture, but I also believe that there is another, more positive bottom line.

As the numerous Voluntary National Reviews have revealed [In 2020 more than 95% of UNECE Members had already conducted a VNR], there is encouraging progress in many areas, for example in reducing poverty and hunger, as well as in improving social protection, access to technology, nature conservation and education. New ideas in areas such as health and social protection or sustainable consumption were vividly debated at this forum and the SDGs are now on everyone’s agenda.

This momentum gives us hope: 2021 must be a year for action, of recovery and of building back better. UN Secretary-General Guterres has outlined his priorities for this year, and I would like to highlight five of them as they are particularly relevant for the SDGs in the UNECE region.

- **First, the immediate solidarity response to COVID-19 and the need to strengthen international cooperation;**
- **Second, the need for an inclusive and sustainable economic recovery which includes making peace with nature as a matter of priority;**
- **Third, tackling the poverty and inequality crisis and embarking on a new social contract;**
- **Fourth, seizing the opportunities of digital technologies while protecting against their growing dangers;**
- **And fifth, resetting for the 21st century and building a reinforced, networked and inclusive multilateral system.**

Since the UNECE's inception, the commission was able to bridge vast differences between its Member States. It achieved this not only by uniting diverse Member States, but also by facilitating the implementation of our global SDGs at the regional, national and local levels.

However, in times of distress, there is often the temptation to turn inwards, to look for solutions in isolation. This is a grave mistake. The pandemic is instead a powerful reminder of our common humanity, of the links that bind us. I urge everyone present today to embrace our global priorities and collectively work on them.

International Geneva, as the operational centre of SDG implementation and a key hub for the work of the UNECE, can be a critical convener in this. With over 100 international organizations, some 750 NGOs, representatives of 180 Member States, a vibrant private sector and world-class academic institutions, International Geneva's unique ecosystem is where we can "connect the dots". I also wish to invite you to use the knowledge and connections of the SDG Lab, an important centre for SDG expertise, located in my office.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are still living under extraordinary circumstances that have constrained our ability to meet and interact in person. UNOG has stepped up to this challenge by deploying technological solutions for virtual exchanges meeting the demand of our Member States, including the respect for multilingualism. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the UN staff for their resilience and adaptability in these challenging times. However, no matter how skilled we become at organising virtual meetings, nothing replaces the quality of human interactions in a physical setting. I am confident that we will return to the face-to-face interactions that thrive in Geneva, equipped with better tools and informed by new insights from this year's virtual forum.

I look forward to welcome you back for the next Regional Forum in Geneva.

Thank you.