

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region 2021

Opening Statement

by Ms. Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary

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Excellencies, distinguished co-chairs,

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to warmly welcome all of you to the 2021 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region.

The exceptional circumstances, of which you are all painfully aware, prevent me from seeing you sitting in a crowded room as in the past. But I know that, from all across our region, you have been joining the peer learning roundtables, pre- and side events leading up to these plenary sessions. And that hundreds of you are connected today to participate in this final part of the Forum. This virtual room is certainly very crowded.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed powerful forces of change that will continue to transform the world we live in long after the health emergency abates.

Now, it is critical that we steer these forces of change in the right direction, that we overcome setbacks, with policies and actions that accelerate progress towards sustainable development.

And for us to know how fast we need to move, it is essential to have a good idea how far we are from meeting our final targets.

This year's regional SDG progress report, prepared under the lead of the UNECE Statistics Division, explicitly asks the question if our region is on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 – and answers it on the basis of an advanced statistical methodology commonly used by all five UN regional commissions.

Besides the preparation of performance indicators on the basis of available data, the report also presents stories and insights that have been contributed

by 15 UN agencies and country teams active in the region. Those stories offer hope, but some also highlight the major obstacles brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, whose impact is not yet reflected in the statistical data.

The final publication is a tangible outcome of the successful cooperation in the Regional Coordination Group on Data and Statistics for Europe and Central Asia.

I urge you to spend some time to give this report the attention it deserves.

Good data is not only the basis of good technical analysis. It is the foundation of a shared understanding of the situation that enables a meaningful political and societal debate about future actions. In the age of disinformation, it is our first line of defence against the forces of confusion.

So, going back to the question, are we on track?

The picture is mixed.

On the basis of past trends, the region would achieve only 23 targets by 2030. Progress in 57 targets should accelerate. For nine targets, trends are negative and need to be reversed.

For 80 targets, almost half of the total, there is no sufficient national data to track change over time. Much progress is necessary therefore not only to meet the targets but also to improve data availability, including in countries with well-developed statistical systems.

There are areas where meeting the goals is clearly within reach, including extreme poverty, undernourishment and malnutrition, access to basic services and adequate housing.

But targets to reduce nationally defined poverty and multidimensional poverty are unlikely to be achieved, in particular given anticipated gaps in social protection related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The region is on course to achieve only 5 of the 13 health and well-being targets. Road traffic safety, health impacts of pollution, and the management of health risks have been improving across the region. Still, more than half of the health targets require acceleration, and the pandemic may further stall progress in areas such as mental health, substance abuse, and health workforce development.

Trends on inequality were already not encouraging and have likely been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A persistent, deeply-rooted, source of inequality – gender-based inequality- has also increased as a result of the crisis.

The region has made good progress on clean fuels and technology, energy efficiency and cutting fossil fuel subsidies. Reduced economic activity and mobility due to COVID-19 related restrictions eased some environmental pressures. But this is a temporary respite that does not reflect a change in policies.

Much needs to be done in critical areas related to climate change and the environment, including the conservation of ecosystems, biodiversity, disaster resilience, waste generation and treatment, and the sustainable use of natural resources. UNECE is particularly active in these and related areas and will support its member States in accelerating progress. The thematic focus of the 69th session of the Commission will be the promotion of a circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in our region. We are canvassing commitments from our member States and we trust that this will provide a new impulse for action.

In short - there is much work to be done.

These enormous challenges remind us again of the strong need for regional and international cooperation and solidarity. Only through joint efforts will we be able to find the required solutions and promote those that work well.

A time of change is also a time of opportunities. Let us share the ideas and spark the creativity that would allow us to seize on those opportunities.

I wish you fruitful and interesting discussions.