

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
117th meeting
Geneva, 8 July 2021
Item 5

Informal Document 2021/15

Review of the sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe

Note by the secretariat
Review of the sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The high-level segment of the sixty-ninth session of the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) was held under the theme “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”. This review was undertaken pursuant to a request by the Executive Committee to assess the implications of the practice of designating a cross-cutting theme for the high-level segment of the session early in the preparatory process. It draws on the feedback from participants and the chairs of sectoral committees and entities reporting directly to the Executive Committee solicited in two surveys, as well as a wealth of other relevant information gathered by the secretariat. Main findings include:

I. **Participation:** The Commission session served as an effective platform for member States to engage in discussions on the high-level theme. The event drew a significantly greater number of registered participants (+ 11%), a much more senior level of participation (49 delegations, 29 ministers, deputy ministers or state secretaries), and broader interest from capitals than the previous session.

II. **Relevance:** 77% of respondents found the high-level theme to be “very” or “extremely relevant”. 86% of respondents considered it useful to designate a high-level theme for the Commission in the future.

III. **Knowledge sharing:** 83% of respondents found the opportunity to learn about the experiences of other governments or organizations “very useful” or “extremely useful”. The session was considered “very useful” or “extremely useful” to increase knowledge about UNECE activities (77%) and to gain a cross-sectoral perspective (73%) on the high-level theme. 72% of responding chairs of sectoral committees or entities reporting directly to EXCOM found the session “useful”, “very useful” or “extremely useful” for strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration across different workstreams in the subprogramme and/or across subprogrammes.

IV. **Impact:** The Commission session increased the visibility of UNECE’s expertise on the high-level theme. It generated significant political momentum for further action in the region as evidenced in the Commission’s high-level statement and its decisions, voluntary commitments submitted by member States, and the sharing of national action plans on the high-level theme. In the lead up to the session, the secretariat initiated a significant number of programmatic and peer learning activities to support the membership in promoting circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources. In line with its mandates, additional activities are being launched in follow up to the Commission’s decisions.

V. **Contributions by UNECE’s subsidiary architecture:** UNECE subprogrammes and relevant subsidiary bodies were actively engaged in the preparation of the session, contributed information on UNECE instruments related to the high-level theme and, within their respective mandates, undertook focused work on the high-level theme. 71% of the responding chairs rated the return on effort expended by their entity in preparation of the session as “good”, 17% as “appropriate”.

VI. **Timeline:** The designation of the theme some 14 months prior to the session provided enough lead time to engage in the preparation of the session for those subsidiary bodies that held their annual session several months after this decision was taken. It was considered insufficient for subsidiary bodies scheduled to convene earlier. Designation of a high-level theme by the end of a Commission year was recommended to allow for an inclusive and comprehensive preparation of a future session with full engagement of all relevant subsidiary bodies.

Based on the above assessment, the review provides some recommendations for the preparation of future Commission sessions.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The sixty-ninth session of the UNECE took place on 20-21 April 2021 with the high-level segment held under the cross-sectoral theme “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”. This theme was chosen by member States in February 2020 at the 109th meeting of the Executive Committee. The [relevant EXCOM decision](#) was as follows:

EXCOM decides to:

a) designate “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region” as cross-cutting theme for the high-level segment of the 69th Commission session.

b) invite relevant subsidiary bodies of UNECE and the secretariat to consider how they may contribute, as appropriate, to the cross-cutting theme of the 69th Commission session within their respective mandates, ongoing work and existing resources, and while making full use of the existing nexuses.

c) request the secretariat to prepare a background document on the cross-cutting theme, detailing a number of relevant UNECE activities and their impact, for discussion at the 69th Commission session.

d) request the secretariat to conduct a post-session lessons learned survey to review the implications of the practice of designating a cross-cutting theme early in the process, and to present to EXCOM a proposal for the preparation of future Commission sessions taking the survey findings into account.

2. The present review has been prepared by the secretariat in response to the above EXCOM decision.

II. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

3. In informal consultations preceding the EXCOM decision, the overall merit of designating a high-level theme was considered. This practice was expected to:

- facilitate peer learning and synergies across subprogrammes;
- showcase how an integrated, multisectoral approach leveraging UNECE norms, standards and conventions and good practice guidance can support member States in their efforts to advance the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- provide the impetus to harness existing expertise and deepen the integrated multi-disciplinary approach around the issue with a view to creating additional synergies in knowledge production and dissemination across the subsidiary bodies of the organization and across subprogrammes.

4. The review is based on the responses provided by participants to a survey, as well as on other available evidence, including data on participation and media reach, statements made by

delegations at the session etc. The survey was circulated to 375 participants and received 52 responses¹ between 1 and 13 June 2021.

5. A separate survey was circulated to the chairs of the UNECE sectoral committees and the bodies reporting directly to the Executive Committee from 1 to 13 June 2021 to assess the impact of the high-level theme on their work.² The 7 responses received complement inputs submitted by these entities in the lead up to the Commission session.

6. After presenting and assessing the evidence available, the review offers some recommendations to inform the future planning of Commission sessions, for further consideration by member States.

III. STOCKTAKE

7. This review of the 69th Commission session considers the impact of the designation of the high-level theme and its relevance to the work of UNECE by addressing five broad topics: Participation, relevance, knowledge sharing, impact, contributions by UNECE's subsidiary architecture and the timeline. As requested by member States, the impact on the work of the subsidiary bodies and on cross-sectoral collaboration is also being considered.

Participation in the sixty-ninth session

8. Participation in the meeting was broad and diverse, with a **marked increase of 11% in the total number of registered participants** between the 68th and 69th sessions (362 compared to 401). In 2021, **245 representatives from UNECE member States attended, almost double compared to 2019 (126). 49 member States delegations were represented**, compared to 43 in 2019, an increase of 14%.

9. The level of participation was significantly more senior, with **29 Heads of delegation being represented at the level of minister, deputy minister and state secretary level** compared to 4 in 2019.

10. In addition to the above-mentioned participants, the 2021 session reached a much broader audience due to the introduction of a new feature, the live web-broadcast of the proceedings via UNTV. **The livestream on UNTV was watched by 968 viewers on day 1 and 373 viewers on day 2 of the session.** On demand recordings are available on the website.

11. The Commission session thus served as an inclusive platform to engage member States in discussions on the designated theme. The programmatic effectiveness of the designation of a high-level theme was gauged through the post-session survey, as specified in the following sections.

¹ 19 respondents were capital-based Government representatives, 14 Geneva-based representatives of Permanent Missions, 2 UN representatives of UN entities, 5 representatives of non-UN international organizations; 10 representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations or the Private sector; and 2 from academia.

² 7 of the 10 subsidiary bodies responded. The Standing Working Group on Aging indicated that their work was not relevant to the high-level theme.

Relevance of the high-level theme

12. The high-level statement and the decisions taken by the sixty-ninth session Commission affirm the importance of the high-level theme. Decision B (69), in particular, underlines the relevance of the theme to member States and its potential to help address ongoing challenges in the region such as the pandemic and the climate crisis. Specifically, the decision emphasizes “the importance of circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), supporting economic prosperity and resilience, addressing environmental pressures, mitigating climate change and building back better in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

13. The statements of delegations during the Commission session expressed broad appreciation for the theme. As documented in the Chair’s summary of the high-level discussions (Annex I and II of the [report of the session](#)), the vast majority of speakers underlined the importance of circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources for sustainable development and a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Over a dozen delegations specifically welcomed the theme and/or praised UNECE for focusing on it at the Commission session.

14. Further, the survey responses confirm that **the theme was found to be very relevant, with 77% of respondents considering it “very” or “extremely” relevant** (Figure 1).

15. In comments provided in the survey, respondents from governments, the private sector and other UN organizations highlighted the synergies between the theme and their respective priorities, and noted that the theme was timely and topical in light of global efforts to recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic.

16. **77% of respondents rated the opportunity to increase knowledge about UNECE activities related to the high-level theme as “very useful” or “extremely useful”.**

17. **73% rated the opportunity to gain cross-sectoral perspective on the theme “very useful” or “extremely useful”** (Figure 1).

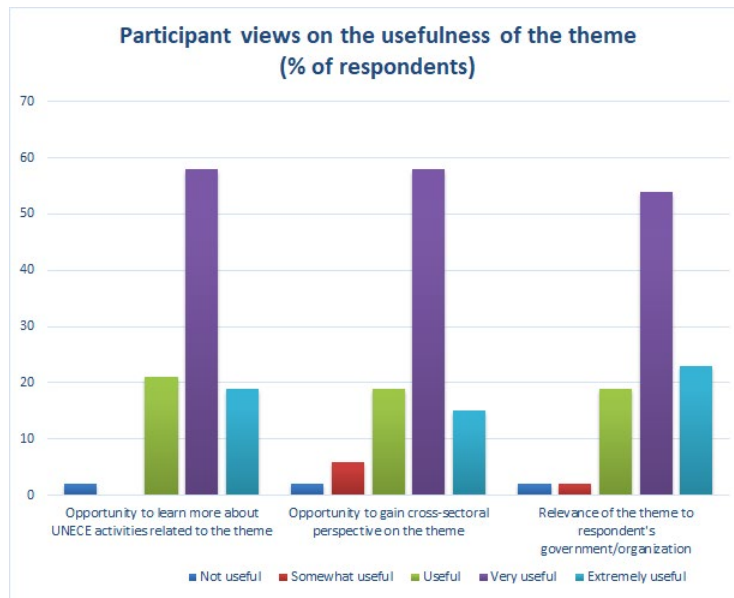


Figure 1

18. **86% of participants considered it useful to designate a high-level theme for the Commission in the future**, with 6% answering “Maybe”.

Knowledge sharing

19. Participant responses to the survey show that the Commission session was greatly appreciated as a means to facilitate peer learning and the exchange of policy experiences.

20. 83% of respondents found the opportunity to learn about the experiences of other governments or organizations “very useful” or “extremely useful” (Figure 2).

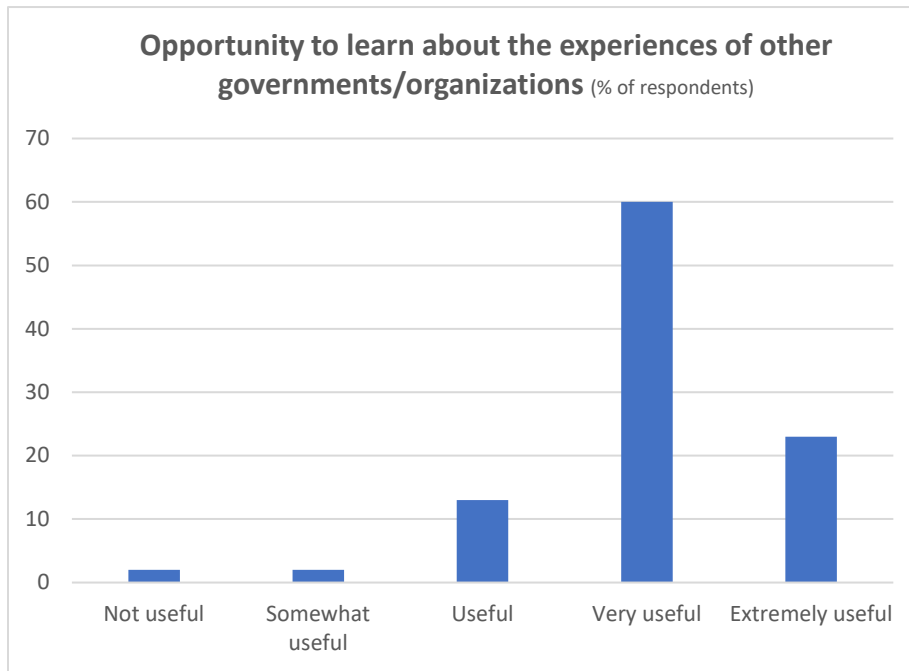


Figure 2

21. Furthermore, 50% of respondents indicated that their engagement in the session incorporated a “high” degree of information sharing on relevant initiatives undertaken by their government or organization (Figure 3).

22. 61% of respondents stated that their engagement in the session was preceded by a “high” level of cross-sectoral consultation within their government or organization (Figure 3).

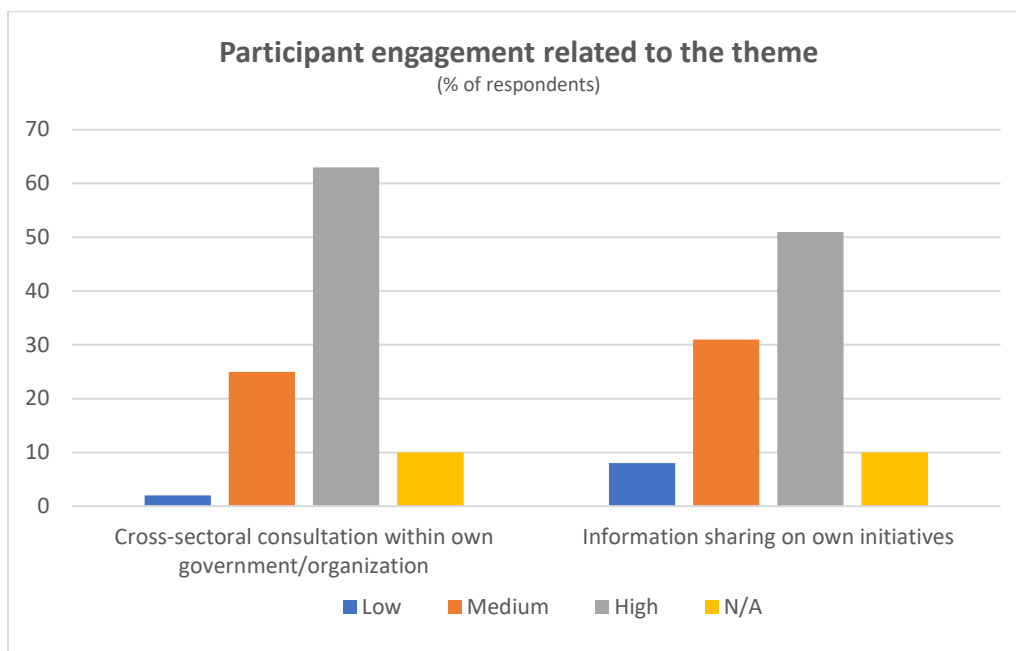


Figure 3

Cross-sectoral knowledge sharing/nexus actions:

23. Almost three quarters of the responding committee chairs (72%) indicated that the session had been “useful”, “very useful” or “extremely useful” for strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration across different workstreams in the subprogramme and/or across subprogrammes.

24. The UNECE subsidiary bodies have been engaging in various cross-sectoral actions and enhancing exchange of experience and contribution to each other’s work. Examples of such knowledge-sharing include:

- The 26th session of the Committee on Environmental Policy was informed of UN/CEFACT activities on enhancing transparency and traceability for sustainable and circular value chains in the garment and footwear industry and [took note of this information with interest](#).
- A list of [cross-sectoral activities under the auspices of the Environment subprogramme](#) was prepared in November 2020.
- The new Task Force on Measuring Circular Economy under the Conference of European Statisticians will take into account the joint UNECE/FAO work on wood-based value chains in a circular economy.

25. The work of the four nexus teams in the UNECE secretariat culminated in the launch of the flagship nexus publications at a dedicated side event preceding the Commission session, covering the topics [Sustainable Mobility and Smart Connectivity](#), [People-Smart Sustainable Cities](#), [Natural Resource Nexuses in the ECE region](#), and [Measuring and Monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#). These publications highlight the interlinkages between the high-level theme and UNECE’s nexus work.

Impact

26. The Commission session increased the visibility of UNECE's expertise on the high-level theme. It generated significant political momentum for further action in the region. In the lead up to the session, the secretariat initiated a large number of programmatic and peer learning activities to support the membership in promoting circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources. Supporting information on these aspects is provided below:

Closer engagement with capitals

27. Direct engagement with capitals of UNECE member States increased markedly, both in overall figures and in seniority (see above). At the 69th session, all but 2 of the statements during the high-level segment were delivered by capital-based representatives. By contrast, in 2019, the session was mostly attended by Geneva-based delegations. The number of ECE government representatives at the session doubled, likewise indicating a wider interest in the event.

Increased visibility in the media

28. The increase in media reach complements this trend. While the number of articles and social media posts about the 68th and 69th sessions do not show large variances (78 vs 73), the audience reached by the media outreach increased sevenfold for articles (24 mio. vs. 178 mio.) and 29% (5.9 mio. vs. 7.6 mio.) for social media posts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). The session also presented the UNECE Executive Secretary with an opportunity to publish op-eds in popular websites such as the [IISD SDG Hub](#), which speaks to the media appeal of the high-level theme.

Political momentum for further action

29. Several member States submitted [voluntary initiatives](#) for further action related to the high-level theme or announced them at the session. Delegations also exchanged information on their [national action plans](#) and other relevant initiatives. The breadth and richness of these documents affirm the strong momentum in the region for accelerated action related to the theme.

Active follow up on session results and reporting to the next Commission

30. Commission decision B (69) requests the UNECE subsidiary bodies to carry out various tasks related to the high-level theme, as appropriate, without affecting their core mandate and activities and subject to available resources:

- consider how to enhance the impact of relevant existing UNECE instruments, in order to foster circular and more resource efficient approaches, including by proposing ways to identify, assess and fill gaps in governance and good practices;
- replicate and scale up existing approaches that facilitate broad and effective use of the appropriate instruments, including through capacity building and knowledge-sharing activities;
- consider developing proposals in their respective programmes of work, including possible collaboration across subprogrammes, for impactful and measurable solutions that promote a circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources.

31. Following the session, the Secretary of the Commission has, in consultations with all subprogrammes and the secretaries of the subsidiary bodies, devised a roadmap for operationalizing decision B (69).

32. The subsidiary bodies who are already working on related issues will continue those activities and explore ways to enhance their impact. Some examples include:

- The **Sustainable Energy** subprogramme, in order to enhance the impact of its outputs on methane management and their contribution to mitigating climate change, joined in June 2021 a Call for Action by the Global Methane Initiative and is in discussions with member States to gather support for a General Assembly declaration of an international decade for methane management.
- At the **2nd Forum of Mayors** in April 2022, UNECE will continue engaging with increasing numbers of mayors from the region to enhance circularity and sustainable resource use in cities.
- The **Joint ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section** is supporting the organization of an October 2021 Ministerial Meeting on Forest Landscape Restoration and the ECCA30/Bonn Challenge in Eastern and South-East Europe, in order to attract further commitments from governments of the region to restore degraded landscapes.

Engagement of the subsidiary architecture of UNECE

33. The secretariat systematically engaged UNECE subsidiary bodies to solicit contributions to the session and harvest relevant expertise available in the subprogrammes:

- In May 2020, all sectoral Committee Chairs responded to the request from the Executive Secretary to assess the relevance of the designated theme to their work and provide information on relevant ongoing or planned initiatives. These inputs informed the substantive planning of the session and its side events.
- Information on relevant instruments developed by UNECE subprogrammes was included in the session’s background document entitled “[Circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources: Toolbox of instruments of the Economic Commission for Europe](#)”
- Several subprogrammes collaborated in preparing the three segments of the Commission’s High-level Roundtable. There was also a broad multisectoral engagement of represented member States, private sector and international organizations.

Roundtable 1 - Circular Energy, Mobility and Digital Transformation: Towards Cradle -to-Cradle Models.	Sustainable Energy (lead); Sustainable Transport
Roundtable 2 - Supply Chain Traceability and Sustainability	Trade & Economic Cooperation and Integration (lead); Forests and the Forest Industry
Roundtable 3 - Business perspectives	Trade & Economic Cooperation and Integration (lead); Innovation, Sustainable Energy, Environment

34. Since the designation of the high-level theme, UNECE’s subsidiary architecture held a large number of dedicated thematic events on relevant aspects of their work or included dedicated agenda items in their proceedings. Some examples include:

Innovation

- o The **Team of Specialists on Innovation and Competitiveness Policies** held an multistakeholder webinar on “[Building Back Better: Using Platforms to Enable Sharing and Progress towards the Circular Economy](#)” on 21 October 2020, focusing on the role of innovation in promoting a transition to a circular economy.

Public-Private Partnerships:

- o The 4th session of the **Working Party on Public-Private Partnerships** (December 2020) discussed the Guidelines on promoting People-first PPP Waste-to-Energy Projects for the Circular Economy.
- o The [programme of the Fifth International PPP Forum](#) (April 2021) included a strong emphasis on circular economy.

UN/CEFACT:

- o The 26th **UN/CEFACT Plenary** in November 2020 launched a [Call to Action for Enhancing Transparency and Traceability of Sustainable Value Chains in Garment and Footwear](#) as a contribution to the 69th Commission session. The Plenary also discussed a [note on UN/CEFACT contributions to advance circular economy actions](#).

Statistics:

- o The Conference of European Statisticians established a [Task Force on Measuring Circular Economy](#) in January 2021.
- o The June 2021 Plenary of the Conference included an [in-depth review of measuring circular economy](#).

Transport:

- o The **Working Party on Inland Water Transport** organized a workshop on “[Circular economy in inland water transport](#)” in October 2020.
- o At its 83rd session in February 2021, the Inland Transport Committee took note of this workshop, expressed its support to the activities of the secretariat in the field of the implementation of circular economy in inland water transport and encouraged other Working Parties to do so.

35. All in all, in the period from February 2020 – April 2021, after the designation of the high-level theme, subsidiary bodies of UNECE held some hundred meetings that included relevant aspects of the theme in the deliberations.

Views of subsidiary architecture on designation of high-level theme

36. Chairs of UNECE sectoral committees and entities reporting directly to EXCOM rated the usefulness of designating a high-level theme highly (Figure 4). With regard to

- **increasing the visibility of existing work**, all chairs considered the theme either as “useful” (33%), “very useful” (50%) or “extremely useful” (17%).

- **prioritizing relevant aspect of the entity’s mandate**, 86% found the theme to be either “very useful” (43%) or “extremely useful” (43%). 17% found it to be “not useful”.
- **deepening engagement in broader political processes**, two-thirds (67%) found the high-level theme “useful” (33%), “very useful” (17%) or “extremely useful” (17%). One third found it to be either “somewhat useful” (17%) or “not useful” (17%).
- **building momentum for further action**, 83% found the theme to be either “useful” (17%), very useful” (49%) or “extremely useful” (17%). 17% found it to be “not useful”.

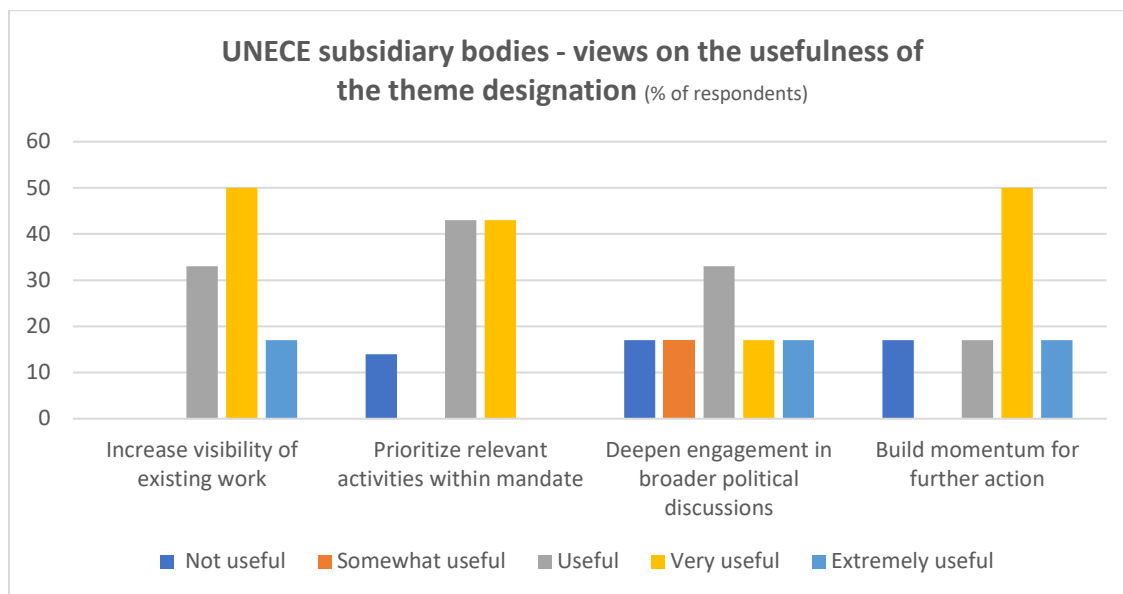


Figure 4³

Return on effort

37. UNECE subprogrammes and relevant subsidiary bodies were actively engaged in the preparation of the session, contributed information on UNECE instruments related to the high-level theme and, within their respective mandates and Programmes of Work, undertook focused activities on the high-level theme. **71% of the responding chairs rated the return on effort expended by their entity in preparation of the session as “good”, 17% as “appropriate”.** (Figure 5)

³ All ratings of “not useful” were given by the Chair of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management. In her explanatory comment, she stated “The Committee was already working on Circular Cities so the topic did not bring anything new.” In this regard, it is worth noting that the high-level segment of the 68th session of the Commission in 2019 was held under the cross-sectoral theme “Smart and Sustainable Cities: Drivers for Sustainable Development.”

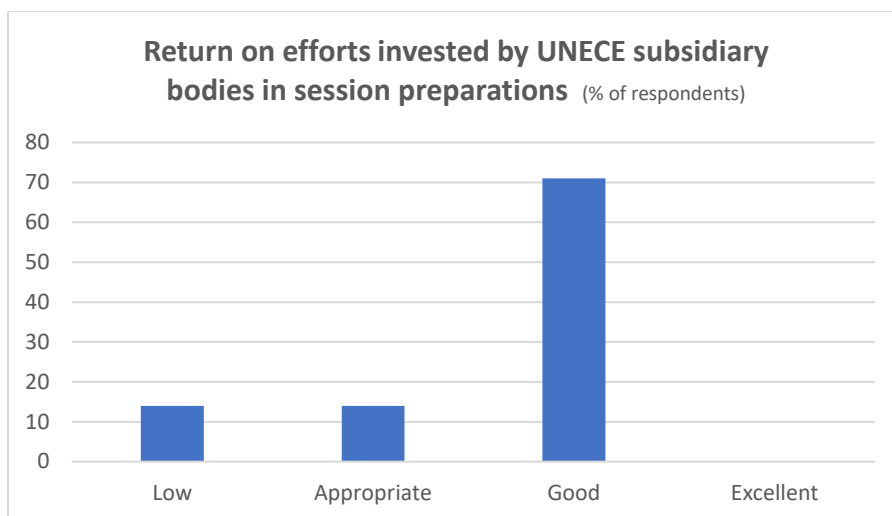


Figure 5⁴

38. **86% of responding chairs thought it would be useful to designate a high-level theme for the Commission in the future.**

39. More detailed subprogramme-specific comments by committee chairs on the high-level theme are contained in Annex I of this document.

Timeline

40. Committee chairs were also asked to assess the timelines related to the Commission preparations and in particular the engagement of their respective entity prior and post designation of the high-level theme in February 2020 (Figure 6).

41. All respondents considered the time to provide inputs to EXCOM deliberations on the theme through their Bureau to be either “appropriate” (67%) or “plentiful” (33%). Likewise, the time to contribute to the Commission programme was found to be sufficient, with 50% considering it “appropriate” and 50% “plentiful”. The assessment of the lead time to discuss in plenary Commission contributions, including draft decisions, however, varied according to the meeting schedule of the respective entities: 67% considered it “appropriate” and 33% “insufficient”. The designation of the theme some 14 months prior to the session provided enough lead time to engage in the preparation of the session for those subsidiary bodies that held their annual session several months after this decision was taken. By contrast, it was considered insufficient for subsidiary bodies scheduled to convene earlier. For example, the 82nd session of the Inland Transport Committee took place just two weeks after the designation of the high-level theme in February 2020. This did not give the Committee enough time to incorporate the theme into its agenda.

⁴ Explanatory comments on ratings:

Low (Chair, Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land management): “It was a very time-consuming exercise - the organization of the circular cities panel - however very little visibility of the event provided.”

Appropriate (Chair, Conference of European Statisticians): Contributions were to the work within the year, not as directly to the session itself - making this questionnaire hard to answer and our contribution estimated as “medium”.

Therefore, the Committee could not deliberate on the topic until February 2021, two months prior to the Commission.

42. **Designation of a high-level theme by the end of a Commission year was recommended to allow for an inclusive and comprehensive preparation of a future session with full engagement of all relevant subsidiary bodies.** (see Annex 1)

43. One chair (SCTCS) commented: “A specific theme allows to focus the rather diverse areas of work of UNECE on one specific topic, which great benefits for communication, outcome and impact. In order to be effective in reaching these objectives, it is important to designate the theme well in advance, allowing for the full (yearly) “cycle” of UNECE’s inter-governmental machinery.” (see Annex I)

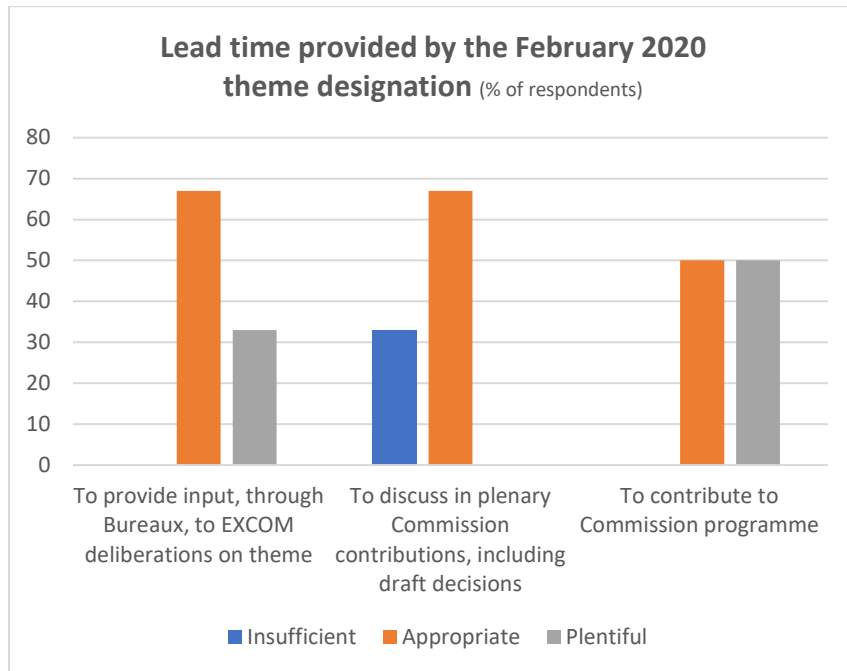


Figure 6⁵

⁵ The rating «insufficient» (lead time to discuss in plenary Commission contributions, including draft decision) was made by two Committees that were scheduled to hold their annual meetings in Feb/March 2021, within a month of the designation of the high-level theme, i.e. Inland Transport Committee and Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships.)

Recommendations

44. Based on the evidence laid out in this review of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission, member States may wish to consider the following recommendations to inform the planning of future Commission sessions:

Recommendation 1. Introduce a cross-sectoral theme as recurrent feature in the high-level segment of future Commission sessions.

The designation of a cross-sectoral theme has demonstrated significant value added for the Commission session, including regarding broadening participation, increasing visibility of UNECE, building political momentum for further action, fostering greater cohesiveness across the subsidiary architecture and leveraging the knowledge of the organization more effectively. To harvest these benefits systematically, this format could be introduced as a standing feature of future Commission sessions.

Recommendation 2. Designate the cross-sectoral theme for the upcoming session by the end of a Commission year to afford all stakeholders sufficient lead time to contribute.

To bring all relevant UNECE expertise to bear related to a cross-cutting theme, the Commission planning process should canvas all subprogramme and relevant parts of the subsidiary architecture for possible contributions. For this to be inclusive, the timing of the designation of a high-level theme is critical. All entities should have the opportunity to consider the theme over the intersessional year, with commensurate leadtime to prepare their respective meeting agendas accordingly. The designation process in EXCOM should thus be concluded by the end of a Commission year. (An indicative planning timeline for the designation process is laid out in document E/ECE/1498 (see esp. paras 39–40). For ease of reference, relevant sections are contained in Annex II of this document).

Recommendation 3. Actively engage sectoral Committees and bodies reporting directly to EXCOM in the preparation of future Commission sessions.

Sectoral Committees and bodies reporting directly to EXCOM have indicated the usefulness of close engagement in the Commission planning process to contribute their programmatic expertise, as appropriate. As indicated in the responses from the Chairpersons, there is room to further deepen their engagement in broader political processes. The Commission may seize this potential to forge even greater synergies across the intergovernmental architecture and further bridge the divide between technical and political processes in planning processes for future sessions.

Recommendation 4. Explore use of virtual and remote participation formats to facilitate more inclusive Commission discussions.

Virtual formats are not intended to replace physical events and all the benefits these bring. However, they can contribute to engaging with stakeholders that may not always be available to join deliberations in the room. As the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic with travel restrictions and social distancing requirements have shown, hybrid meeting formats and pre-recorded messages provide additional formats to engage with senior level representatives from capital or open the proceedings to a broader audience through webcasting/UNTV.

ANNEX I

Comments by Chairs of UNECE subsidiary bodies on the high-level theme

<p>Committee on Environmental Policy</p>	<p>The selection of the theme "circular economy" could not have been more timely and relevant to the work of the CEP, given that one of the two themes of the 9th Ministerial Conference on Environment for Europe (2022) is the circular economy applied to the tourism sector. The approach to this issue in the Committee session constitutes a launching pad for our Conference and creates an even easier and more stimulated platform for interaction, both within the scope of the different programs of the UN/ECE and in the different Ministries and levels of Administration of the Member States.</p> <p>The selection of a theme works as an aggregating and directing element of the work, and especially when it comes to a cross-cutting theme, it allows to bring together all the capacity and expertise of the UN/ECE to work for the same purpose. It is an excellent methodology for identifying and maximizing synergies within an organization and between different areas of public policy.</p> <p>The promotion of the circular economy is an aspirational goal currently with great relevance on the international agenda, but it continues to raise many doubts about its realization, i.e, with the exception of the waste domain, there is significant uncertainty about the most appropriate way to implement/achieve a circular economy. The selection of the theme in an organization with the characteristics of the UN/ECE, with the scope of the subjects it deals with, allows to identify good solutions, find good measures both at the UN/ECE and its member states, to promote the circular economy. For the CEP, the selection of this theme was even more important considering that it is one of the two themes (associated with the tourism sector) of the next Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (2022), thus functioning as a launching pad for the preparation of our Conference.</p> <p>The choice of a transversal theme favors joint work and the identification of synergies that only benefit the UN/ECE and its member states. Organizations such as the UN/ECE, although having specializations, have a more markedly territorial nature and, therefore, are better able to address cross-cutting issues and, from their broad work agenda, contributing decisively to the resolution of problems associated with these themes.</p>
<p>Conference of European Statisticians</p>	<p>High level priorities and theme are useful to streamline the work but must take into consideration Country priorities and local strategic work at the committee level.</p>
<p>Committee on Sustainable Energy</p>	<p>It would be helpful, if proposals could be discussed in the subsidiary bodies with some lead time before a decision on theme(s) is made.</p>
<p>Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management</p>	<p>The Committee was already working on Circular Cities so the topic did not bring anything new.</p>
<p>Inland Transport Committee</p>	<p>Although this is not the core of our work, it helped to understand actual and future necessary actions on this theme in our Committee and its subsidiary bodies.</p>

Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards

In general, the designation of a specific theme, well advance of the sessions of the respective subsidiary bodies is surely useful as it allows the respective subsidiary bodies to make substantive contributions. In the run up to the 69th Commission session, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extremely limited meeting time for subsidiary bodies (on many occasions, only informal consultations) made it difficult to realize the objective of this, in general, very useful approach. I hope that for the 70th session, no such extra-ordinary circumstances will occur.

Yes, a specific theme allows to focus the rather diverse areas of work of UNECE on one specific topics, which great benefits for communication, outcome and impact. In order to be effective in reaching these objectives, it is important to designate the theme well in advance, allowing for the full (yearly) “cycle” of UNECE’s inter-governmental machinery.

ANNEX II

Excerpts from document E/ECE/1498

**Progress report on the work of the Economic Commission for Europe
related to the high-level theme of the sixty-eighth session****IV.Planning for the high-level theme****Preparations for the sixty-eighth session**

32. The theme for the high-level segment of the sixty-eighth session was adopted by member States at the 100th meeting of EXCOM in September 2018, approximately seven months prior to the Commission session. Within this short lead-time, the secretariat concentrated preparations on the programme planning of the relevant agenda items, including in particular the keynote addresses for the high-level segment and the roundtable for the high-level dialogue on “Regional and national solutions towards smart sustainable cities and the impact of ECE instruments.” A background document was compiled, the “Toolbox of the Economic Commission for Europe: Instruments to support the transition to smart sustainable cities” (E/ECE/1489). Moreover, accompanying side events were arranged, including an exhibition and information fair that showcased success stories and presented tools used to embrace smart and sustainable practices.

33. The Commission session was preceded by a [Day of Cities](#). To inform the intergovernmental discussions of ECE member States, Mayors and local authorities discussed how to create smart sustainable cities, focusing on ways to improve the quality of life of people and on improving efficiency of urban operations, services and competitiveness. Over 40 Mayors from the ECE region exchanged views and shared knowledge on good practices and successful planning strategies (see [E/ECE/HBP/2019/3](#)).

34. The short lead time, however, did not allow for an in-depth engagement of the entire subsidiary architecture of the Commission prior to the session. Many subsidiary bodies did not convene until after the Commission session; and those who held their regularly scheduled meetings could only adjust their agenda to a limited extent. The seventy-ninth session of the Committee on Housing and Land Management, for example, took place already in October 2018. Consequently, and as outlined above, much of the deepened cross-sectoral engagement of the expert bodies took place after the Commission session.

Preparations for the sixty-ninth session

35. The sixty-ninth session of the Commission will also be held under a cross-cutting theme for the high-level segment. Drawing on the lessons learned from the sixty-eighth session, the theme “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources” was adopted earlier: Member States designated it at the 109th meeting of EXCOM in February 2020, fourteen months ahead of the session. EXCOM invited relevant subsidiary bodies of ECE and the secretariat to consider how they may contribute, as appropriate, to the cross-cutting theme of the session within their respective mandates, ongoing work and existing resources, and while making full use of the existing nexuses.

36. This approach generated significant additional momentum and inspired broad consideration of the theme across the organization ahead of the Commission session. Especially bodies whose regular annual sessions were scheduled with sufficient lead time were able to include consideration of the item into their meeting agendas. Some sectoral Committees forwarded recommendations for further consideration by the Commission. Other entities seized the opportunity to host knowledge-sharing and peer learning activities and contributed to side events, including those of ECE partner organizations, during the intersessional period. Within its established mandates, the secretariat included the designated theme in its workplans and in the cross-divisional work of the nexus teams.

37. To facilitate early engagement even of bodies whose meeting schedule did not align well to the planning timeline, the Executive Secretary reached out to the Bureaux of all sectoral Committees and requested their inputs. Information on relevant work already undertaken, activities in progress, and possible future opportunities was solicited and reported back to the Executive Committee (EXCOM) throughout the intersessional period to inform further Commission preparation.

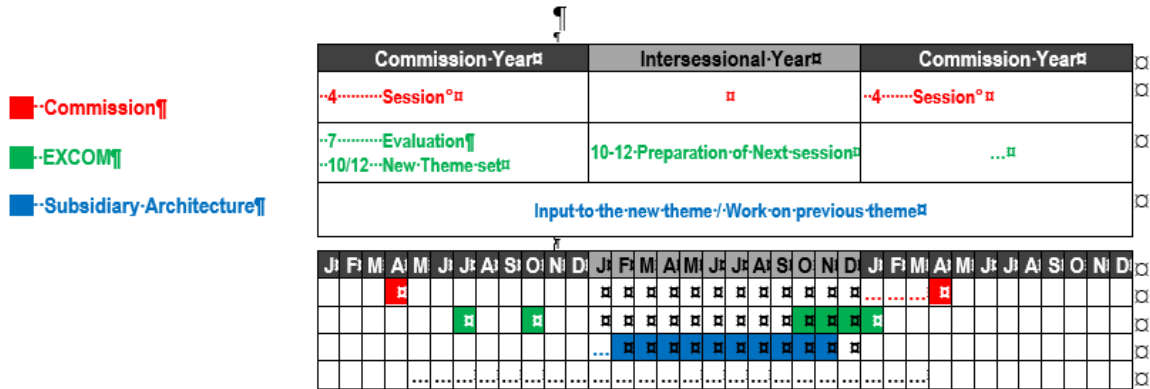
38. Member States welcomed this comprehensive approach but noted that not all bodies had been able to fully participate in the Commission preparation, as not all entities had been able to consider the issue during their formal plenary sessions. This was largely due to the fact that the subsidiary architecture of ECE did not have a complete annual meeting cycle to engage in the thematic discussions before EXCOM started informal consultations on possible draft decisions of the Commission and the formulation of the provisional agenda of the session in the fall of 2020. (The Inland Transport Committee, for example, convened only one week after the designation of the high-level theme and contributed mostly through informal inputs of the Bureau ahead of its subsequent plenary session in February 2021.) An additional constraint for full engagement was posed by the established documentation timelines that require submission of parliamentary documentation 10 weeks ahead of the respective meeting. The situation was further exacerbated by the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic that led to a significant reorganization of ECE's official calendar of meeting and the impact of the liquidity crisis of the Secretariat that reduced the meeting servicing capacity available for formal ECE meetings by two-thirds of its regular quota.

Proposed future planning timeline

39. To review the implications of the practice of designating a cross-cutting theme early in the process, EXCOM requested the secretariat to conduct a post-session lessons learned survey, and to prepare a proposal for the preparation of future Commission sessions. It is foreseen that EXCOM will review the findings of such a survey in July 2021. Taking into account the experiences gained during the preparations of the sixty-eighth and the sixty-ninth Commission sessions, respectively, EXCOM may wish to consider designating a high-level theme for the subsequent Commission session even earlier than in the past, ideally within six months of the preceding session. This would allow each subsidiary body to hold its annual meeting sufficiently ahead of the following Commission session, to significantly advance work related to the high-level theme, and submit substantial contributions and recommendations through EXCOM for consideration at the Commission session.

40. A proposed future planning timeline for the designation of a high-level theme could thus be as follows: Within three months of a Commission session (April), EXCOM would review the findings of a post-session lessons learned survey (July of a Commission year). As appropriate, at that time first proposals for a future Commission theme could be presented to member States for consideration. By October, or latest December of the Commission year, EXCOM would designate a high-level theme for the following Commission session and request the subsidiary bodies to contribute to the Commission preparations. Each subsidiary body would then have the entirety of the intersessional year to deliberate on the theme and make recommendation on how it may contribute within its mandated activities. These inputs would inform further planning by EXCOM, including through the review of recommendations made at the expert level for possible draft decisions to be transmitted to the Commission for consideration. Such a planning cycle would allow member States to benefit from the full expertise of ECE and advance their preparations for the session in time for the established documentation timelines.

Possible future planning cycle of the preparation of Commission sessions



41. To monitor the impact of the designation of a high-level theme, the Commission could routinely include in its agenda a progress report of the Commission on the high-level theme of its prior session. Such a document would inform a related agenda item to be considered on the second day of future Commission sessions.