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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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Item 8

Informal Document 2022/35

**Draft Evaluation of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the
UNECE Region**

(for approval)

EXCOM is invited to submit the below draft evaluation to the seventieth session of the Commission for consideration under agenda item 7 “Other issues calling for decision by the Commission.”

Evaluation of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region

Note by the Secretariat

Part I. Introduction, scope and methodology

This note has been prepared to fulfil the request made by Decision C (69) of the Economic Commission for Europe requesting “*the secretariat to prepare an evaluation of the added value of the Regional Forums held in 2021 and 2022 for submission to the seventieth session of the Commission*”. An evaluation of the Regional Forum was already conducted in 2020 (document E/ECE/1501), covering the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region organized in 2018, 2019 and 2020, following the establishment of the Regional Forum by Decision B (67) of the ECE in 2017.

Scope

Decision C (69) reaffirms the provisions contained in B (67) on the role, objectives and format of the Regional Forum.

Decision B (67) states that the RFSD:

- is established “as a regional mechanism to follow-up and review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”,
- is convened “in close cooperation with the entities of the regional United Nations system”.

The RFSD will “focus on practical value added, taking into account the work of existing regional bodies and mechanisms, including peer review mechanisms, while avoiding additional reporting burdens for member States, and contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by:

- a. creating a space for UNECE member States for peer learning and the exchange of policy experiences and good practices in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals;
- b. providing a regional and sub-regional overview of progress and challenges in implementation that would complement analogous reports at the global level;
- c. enhancing regional and sub-regional cooperation and addressing transboundary issues;
- d. providing a platform for the participation and contributions of all relevant stakeholders, including international and regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector, following the relevant provisions of the 2030 Agenda and the corresponding decisions of the Economic and Social Council”.

In addition, Decision C (69) requested the secretariat to develop the agenda of each Forum “in close consultation with member States, and to align it with the respective themes and programme of work of the high-level political forum on sustainable development under the auspices of ECOSOC, with a focus on those aspects that are particularly relevant to the ECE region and taking into account the findings of the evaluation of the Regional Forum”. It was also decided to “submit the reports of the sessions of the Regional Forum, including the Chair’s summary of the discussions with key messages, to the high-level political forum on sustainable development under the auspices of ECOSOC, as part of the regional contributions to the global follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda”.

On the basis of this decision, the evaluation will consider the relevance and impact of the RFSD by addressing three groups of questions:

- a. **RFSD as a valued and participative multi-stakeholder platform supported by the**

engagement of the regional United Nations system

- Has the RFSD continued to be recognised as a broad and valued platform to engage member States in practical discussions on sustainable development in the ECE region?
- Do the entities of the regional United Nations system remain closely engaged in the preparation of the annual RFSD?
- Has the RFSD provided an effective platform for the participation of all relevant stakeholders?

b. Content and organization of the discussions

- Has the agenda of each RFSD been prepared to reflect issues of particular interest to the region?
- Has the RFSD contributed to enhance sub-regional cooperation and addressed transboundary issues?
- Has the RFSD provided elements for the assessment of regional and sub-regional progress and challenges in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?
- Have the RFSDs taken into account the lessons derived from previous RFSDs and the 2020 evaluation?
- Is the role of the RFSD as a space for peer learning and the exchange of policy experiences appreciated and supported by member States?

c. Outputs and its use

- How has the mandated Chair's summary been prepared? How have the outcomes of the RFSD been presented at the global level?

In particular, the evaluation will consider, in relation to the points above, the experiences regarding the incorporation of virtual elements in the Regional Forum and the linkages with the second Forum of Mayors (4-5 April 2022).

Regarding the **efficiency** of the RFSD, the evaluation will look at the resources used for the RFSD in comparison with the results obtained. In addition, it will also consider the stability of existing resources.

After presenting and assessing the evidence available, the evaluation will offer some **conclusions**.

Methodology

The evaluation will be based on the responses provided by government participants to the evaluation surveys circulated after each annual RFSD and other available evidence, including RFSD reports and programmes, data on participation and project documents submitted to EXCOM.

Part II. Taking stock of past Regional Forums on Sustainable Development

1. Assessing the RFSD as a valued and participative multi-stakeholder platform supported by the engagement of the regional United Nations system

a) RFSD as a valued multi-stakeholder platform

The Forum has continued to attract a large number of registered participants, reaching 1,444 in 2021 and 958 in 2022. Numbers in 2021 were boosted by the large number of round tables organized (12 versus 8 in 2022), which reflected differences in the number of SDGs under in-depth review each year (9 and 5 in 2021 and 2022, respectively). These figures compare well with those observed in 2018 and 2019, when they reached 652 and 855, respectively. Comparisons with 2020 are not relevant, as the pandemic forced a last minute change of format which included a much shorter programme and the possibility of remote participation only. The first session in 2017, which preceded Decision B (67) gathered 383 participants.

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the composition of registered participants, which shows the increased interest of government participants and the continued engagement of non-governmental organizations and entities from the UN system.

Table 1. Composition of registered participants, percentages

	2018	2019	2021	2022
Total	100	100	100	100
Governments	36.2	32.2	39.7	43.6
Intergovernmental organizations	4.6	4.9	3.4	2.9
NGO sector	21.9	28.9	19.0	22.5
Private	2.9	1.3	2.9	1.4
Academia	5.4	3.6	6.1	4.1
UN organizations	12.7	21.9	22.3	21.1
Others	16.3	7.3	6.6	4.3

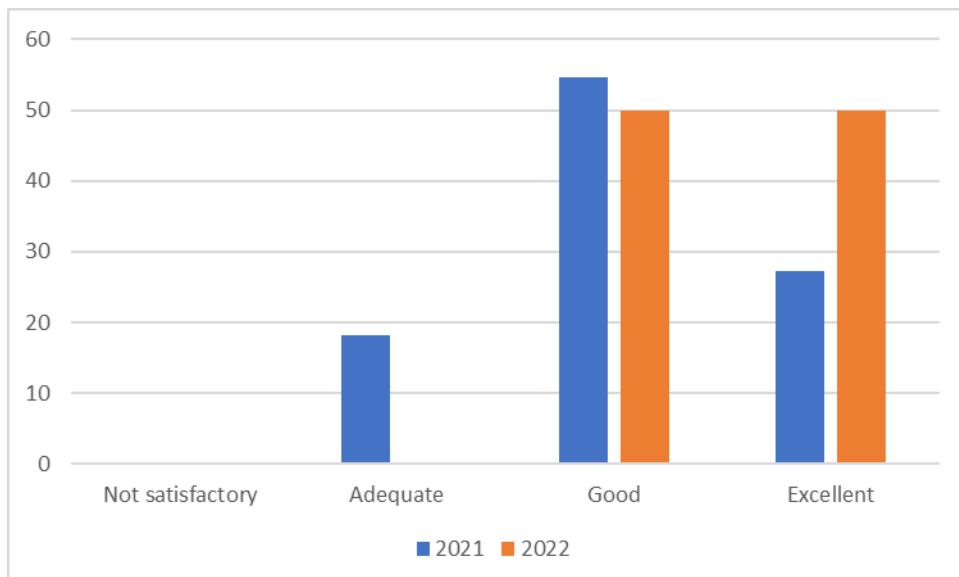
Note: In this table, governments include also EU delegates. UN organizations do not include ECE secretariat.

In both 2021 and 2022, the RFSD was attended by representatives of 52 ECE member States. The median size of member States delegations was 7.0 in both years, a significant increase in comparison with the values observed in 2019 and 2020, 4.0 to 4.5, respectively.

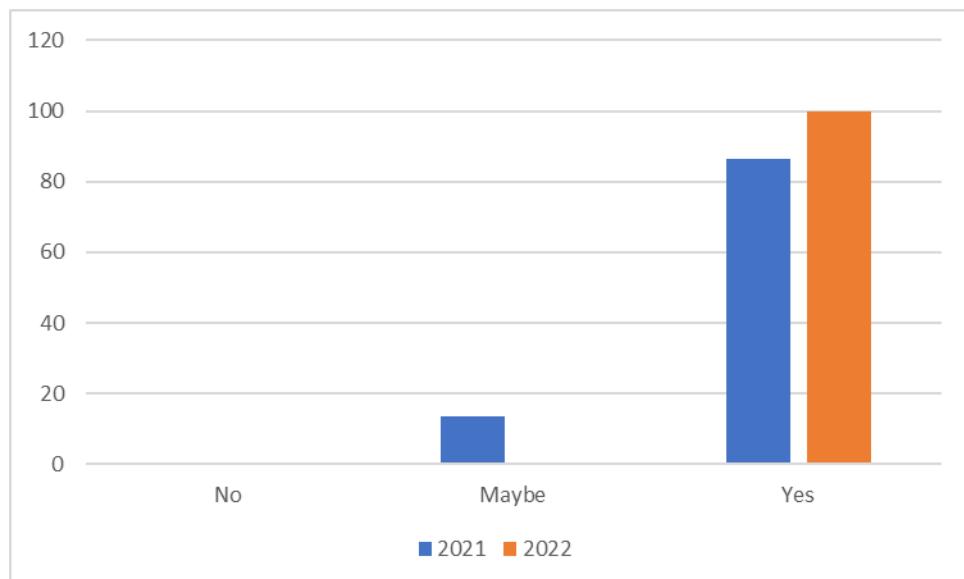
Relatively large sizes of the delegations and their composition reflect the varied thematic issues and formats for participation, ranging from high-level cross-sectoral policy discussions to more focused peer learning events.

1. The increased value attached by multiple stakeholders to the RFSD as a platform to engage with the sustainable development community can be seen in the dynamics of side events as well, which have continued to increase steadily, reaching 22 in 2021 and 34 in 2022. By comparison, side events in 2018 and 2019 were 9 and 18 respectively.
2. The positive assessment of the RFSDs implicit in these participation and organizational trends is confirmed by the results of the surveys that were circulated among participants after each meeting to gauge their views on different issues^a.
3. The overall assessment of the RFSD by government participants was positive in 2021 and 2022, with a clear shift towards those that consider it as excellent (Chart 2).

^a The results of the evaluation surveys of the Regional Forums 2021-2022 are available at <https://regionalforum.unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Survey%20RFSD%202021.pdf> (2021) and <https://regionalforum.unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Survey%20RFSD%202022.pdf> (2022).

Chart 1. Overall assessment by government delegates of the RFSDs, percentages

4. A growing number of government delegates recommend participation in future Forums (Chart 2).

Chart 2. Recommendations on future participation by government delegates, percentages

b. Involvement of United Nations departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations, conventions and initiatives

The RFSDs have been organized in close cooperation with the regional UN system, in particular regarding the peer learning segment. This reflects the request in Decision B (67) to convene the Forum in “close cooperation with the entities of the regional United Nations system”. The collaboration included the design of the programme, the mobilisation of participants and speakers, the provision of resource persons and the implementation of practical organizational arrangements. In some cases, other UN entities have contributed to cover logistic and interpretation costs. As in recent editions, round tables had typically one or two lead organizers and were supported by the collaboration of three to four participating agencies.

Altogether, 41 United Nations departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations, conventions and initiatives participated in the RFSD in 2021 and 27 in 2022. The prominent role of the RFSD as an all-inclusive platform on regional sustainable development was enhanced further by the participation of UN Resident Coordinators and representatives of resident coordinator officers from 8 programme countries in 2021 and 13 in 2022.

c. The involvement of civil society and other stakeholders

Civil society organizations have continued to meet every year in the margins of the RFSD and reported the conclusions of their discussions to the RFSD, thus supporting the request contained in Decision B (67) to “provide a platform for the participation of all stakeholders”. A Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism, owned and driven by civil society organizations, has emerged as a platform to enable stronger cross constituency coordination covering five subregions in UNECE and fourteen different constituencies. Civil society representatives nominated through the coordination mechanism have also brought their views and policy examples into the peer learning discussions.

Following a practice introduced in 2019, pre-meetings of youth representatives took place in 2021 and 2022, bringing together young people from the region to discuss the Sustainable Development Goals. Messages from these meeting were conveyed to the RFSD each year.

After the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted earlier plans to organise an SDG business event, a first-ever SDG business dialogue, organised by UN Global Compact, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and UNECE took place in 2021. The focus of the event was on business action and partnerships to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of the COVID-19 recovery. This initiative, which was well received, was repeated in 2022, with a focus on advancing gender equality and women's leadership in selected industries.

In 2022, the Forum of Mayors was organised back-to-back with the Regional Forum to facilitate synergies. According to a decision of the ECE Executive Committee (ECE/EX/2020/L.16), the 2022 Forum of Mayors should “report both to the RFSD and the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (CUDHLM)”. According to this provision, the Rapporteur of the 2022 Forum of Mayors presented the summary of the Forum of Mayors to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

The overall theme of the Forum of Mayors (“Recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic while advancing the implementation of the SDGs”) was in line with that of the High-level Political Forum and the Regional Forum (“Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”). In 2023, the inclusion of SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) among the SDGs under in-depth review in 2023 will open new and additional possibilities for linkages and collaboration between both events.

2. Content and organization of the discussions

As in previous editions, the agenda of the RFSD has been prepared through close consultations with member States and partners in the UN system. While being aligned with the overall discussions at the HLPF, these close consultations have ensured that the topics under consideration reflect issues that are of particular interest to the region.

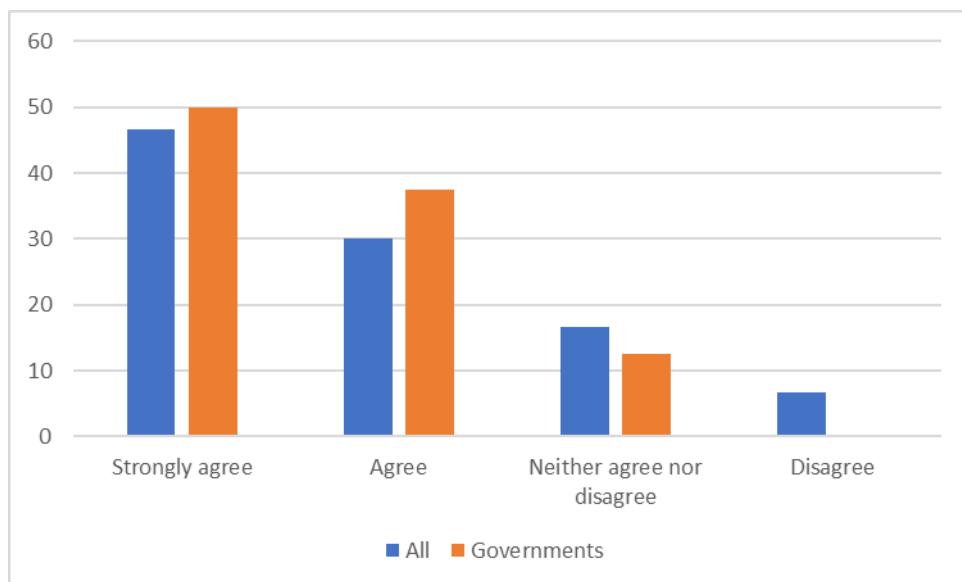
The focus of the RFSDs has been on voluntary peer learning and sharing of experiences, practical solutions and challenges in implementing the SDGs among governments and other stakeholders.

After the pandemic introduced a forced change in the structure of the Forum in 2020, without a separate peer learning segment, the Forums returned to the earlier format, which included a high-level policy segment, a peer learning segment with a number of parallel round tables and a final concluding session. In 2021, all round tables were virtual while in 2022, a hybrid model was used in all segments of the Forum, as agreed with

member States during informal discussions on the preparation of the Forum. While the use of virtual elements in the organization of the Forum was initially dictated by the health situation, the feedback received suggested that retaining virtual access, in combination with a physical meeting, was a welcome feature of the Forum.

Responses to the 2021 survey showed that almost three quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the use of virtual platforms to organise peer learning sessions, with those that were clearly against it represented less than 5%. The acceptance of this option was less marked among government participants. While 61.1% agreed with the use of virtual platforms, no government respondent showed strong agreement. Their opinion, however, seems to have become more favourable to the continued used of virtual elements in the future, following the 2022 experience where virtual elements were incorporate in a hybrid model (chart 3). There are, however, financial implications resulting from the incorporation of virtual elements and other aspects related to accessibility that will be presented in section 4.

Chart 3. Future use of virtual platforms to organized peer learning sessions, 2022 survey, percentages



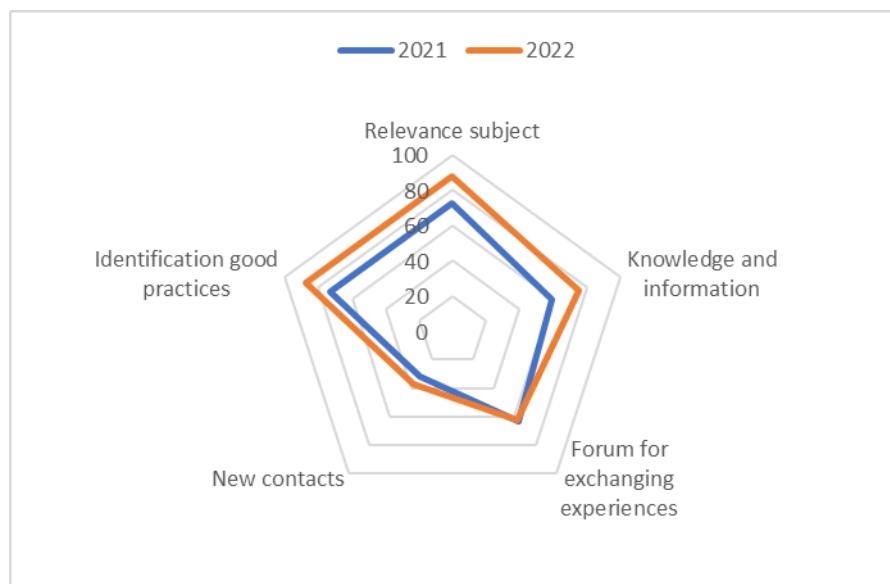
Transboundary aspects have been raised in the policy exchanges that have taken place in the RFSD, as reflected in the Chair's summaries included in the reports of the RFSDs. In 2021, the transboundary impacts of the disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic were a central part of the discussions. In 2022, transboundary considerations were paramount for some topics covered that year, such as ocean literacy and the sustainable development of regional seas, the acceleration of digital development through multistakeholder partnerships or the protection and restoration of terrestrial ecosystems.

Intergovernmental and regional organizations and networks have participated regularly in the RFSD, adding to the diversity of experiences under discussion, totalling 23 and 18 in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Variations in numbers are largely explained by the topics under discussion. Side events with a particular subregional focus have been organised, often with the support of some member States.

As in recent editions, comprehensive statistical reports on SDG implementation in the region were launched in 2021 and 2022 in accordance with the request made in Decision B (68).

Discussions at the RFSD remain highly relevant, as reflected in survey results and the reports of the meetings. The appreciation of the Forum across multiple dimensions related to knowledge acquisition and exchange is consistently strong (Chart 4). The slight improvement seen between 2021 and 2022 may be attributed to the shift from a purely virtual to a hybrid mode in the peer learning sessions, including the possibility of physical participation.

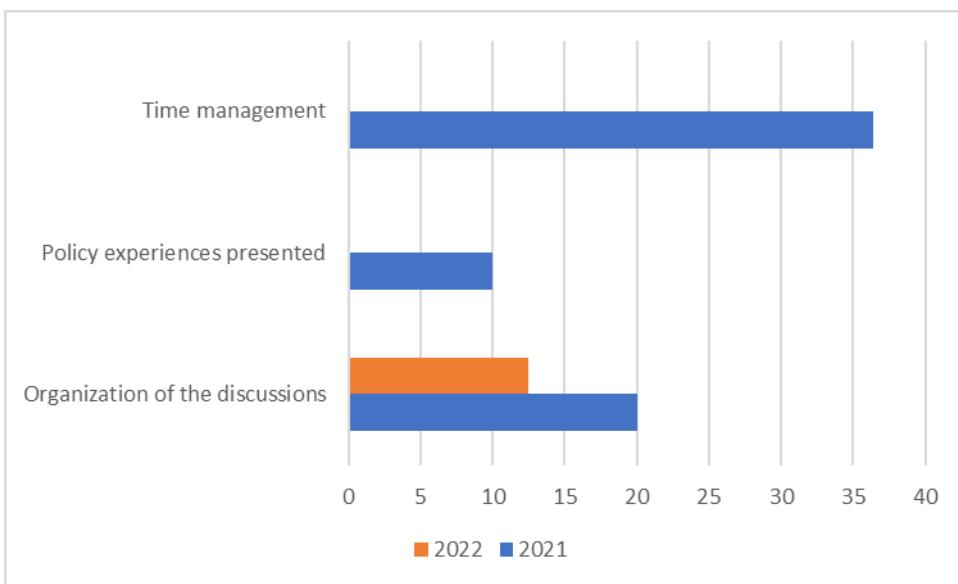
Chart 4. Assessment by government delegates, very useful or extremely useful, percentages



The only area that stands out as having relatively low marks is the role of the Forum as providing an opportunity to establish new useful contacts (only 37.5% of respondents to the 2022 survey considered that it was very or extremely useful, while 36.4% deemed it as just useful). Addressing this question may require creating more spaces for informal interaction, including by exploiting more fully the potential of digitalisation.

The overall assessment of the peer learning experience by government delegates continues to be highly positive: 62.5% of government respondents considered that it was very good or excellent in 2022, up from 58.4% in 2021. In both years, nobody thought that it was poor or in need of improvements.

Focusing the attention on the negative scores (poor or in need of improvement), some progress has been observed in the last two editions, with only the organization of the discussions remaining as an area that would deserve increased attention (Chart 5). There are multiple aspects that should be considered in this regard: tailoring content to the level of expertise of the audience, having a varied but overall consistent range of interventions, facilitating the representation of different groups of stakeholders and respecting time limitations. Given their leading role in organising peer learning sessions, regional United Nations entities should be closely involved in developing new options for improving the organisation of the discussions, which may include the use of pre-meeting documentation and more active moderation.

Chart 5. Peer learning assessment by government delegates, poor or in need of improvement, percentages

3. Outputs of the Forum and its use

As in past editions, a Chair's summary reflecting the discussions has been prepared each year through a consultative process that has given an opportunity to member States to submit changes to the draft reports as well as to all other participants to express their views on the drafts. The summary was finally issued under the authority of the Chair and submitted on time to the HLPF each year. The Chairs of the RFSD reported at the HLPF regional assessments on SDG progress and the outcomes of the Forums based on these summaries. In addition, the Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions have been invited to intervene in thematic sessions, providing an opportunity to feed in selected key messages from the regional discussions.

4. Resource requirements

The RFSD has been serviced by the UNECE Sustainable Development and Gender Unit. Extrabudgetary resources have been raised to finance travel of participants, interpretation and other costs, as detailed in the two extrabudgetary projects presented to EXCOM (Informal Documents [2019/52/Rev.1](#) for 2020-2021 and [2021/41](#)). Financial contributions to the RFSDs were provided by the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation and Switzerland.

According to these project documents, the preparation of the annual RFSD has absorbed regular budget staff resources equivalent to one month of a D1, 1.5 months of a P5 and 2.5 months of a P4. In addition to these resources, a JPO provided by Germany provided support to the preparation of the 2021 RFSD and related activities. After the JPO contract expired in November 2021, part of the extrabudgetary financing was needed to engage support by an individual contractor for 4 months, as detailed in Informal Document 2021/41. Two additional months of work were financed by the regular budget. The 2022 RFSD also benefited from the collaboration of two interns.

Extrabudgetary financing has been essential to incorporate virtual elements in the Forum and to hire minimal external support to deal with the complexity of a multi-event activity that raises many organisational and logistical demands. Improved accessibility through the use of subtitles and sign language has been made possible through the extrabudgetary financing raised. The large number of events as part of the Forum raises interpretation needs beyond available quotas. In addition, limited financial assistance has been provided to facilitate the participation of government officials and non-governmental organizations. The continuation of the Forum as in recent editions- a multistakeholder and inclusive platform- and the exploration of new options to extend its reach and impact will depend on the continued availability of financial support.

Part III. Conclusions

The Regional Forum continues to receive consistently high rates of approval and attracts the interest of many participants. Its role as an inclusive regional platform to discuss and exchange experiences is well established, as is its connection with the High-level Political Forum and its contribution to the overall architecture for the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The use of virtual elements was initially forced by health circumstances, but it has now become a feature that is generally appreciated. While the incorporation of these elements is not intended to replace physical events and all the benefits these bring, virtual features can facilitate participation, the organisation of activities and the exploration of alternative formats, taking advantage of the potential offered by digitalization to improve the organization of the discussions and facilitate networking. However, incorporating these elements cannot be taken for granted, given the logistic and financial implications and the limited means at the disposal of the Secretariat.

The Forum has made progress in widening the engagement of multiple stakeholders. The involvement of youth and non-governmental organizations (which include also women and trade union organizations) is well established in the architecture of the Forum. More recently, new mechanisms for the participation of the business sector and local authorities have been incorporated. Academic representatives are also regularly represented, although there are no formal channels to receive their inputs, as is the case for other groups. The evolution observed has enhanced the role that the stakeholders represented in the Major Groups have at the Regional Forum. New options could be explored to strengthen the contribution that these groups can make, including by adding to the available evidence on progress in the region and offering new sources of knowledge for the exchange of experiences. In this line, the RFSD could be used as a platform to discuss issues related to Voluntary Local Reviews among a broader development audience and to provide a suitable context for these Reviews.

The interest on the Forum and its ability to attract a large number of participants to discuss different topics is well proved. While spending funds on marketing is not required, essential components of the Forum (basic support for its organisation, virtual features or inclusion-related elements, for example) need continued access to extrabudgetary financing.
