Distinguished delegates and experts,
Dear partners and donors,
Dear colleagues and friends,

2023 was certainly a challenging year. Against the backdrop of a weakening global economy, lack of progress on the SDGs and waning support to multilateralism, the year brought continued and new armed conflicts and numerous environmental disasters.

Added to this are the many questions that game-changing new and emerging technologies, Artificial Intelligence prime among them, pose to policy makers, private sector and consumers around the globe.

Today, economic cooperation initiatives in the fields of trade, infrastructure investment and innovation, are needed, more than ever. Their success, however, will be judged on whether they deliver on the SDGs.

In UNECE’s Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD), we have pooled our energies to offer concrete and tangible ways for harnessing the power of trade, infrastructure investment and innovation for the sustainable development of the Pan-European region.

Please find below a glimpse of what we have achieved during 2023.

I would like to thank our member States, partners and donors; our speakers, delegates and experts; as well as our friends and colleagues in UNECE and beyond, for the continuous support throughout the year. Our norm-setting, convening power, analytical work and technical assistance could thrive thanks to your support, engagement and contributions!
I would also like to thank the Division’s team members for their professionalism, resilience and dedication – they are an integral part of our success! Finally, my sincere appreciation goes to UNECE’s senior management, Ms. Tatiana Molcean, Executive Secretary, and Mr. Dmitry Mariyasin, Deputy Executive Secretary.

I wish everybody a happy, healthy, and successful New Year!

With best wishes,
Elisabeth Türk
Director, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

In response to the mandates emanating from UNECE’s 70th Commission session (April 2023), our two sectoral Committees and our Working Parties (WPs) charted the way forward for the ECTD team to embrace the digital and green transformations in their future work. For example:

- In May 2023, our Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public Private Partnerships (CICPPP) launched work on two practical guides that will offer policy recommendations for public officials on PPPs and the digital transformation.
- In June 2023, our Trade Committee called upon the ECTD team to integrate the digital transformation into our trade-related capacity building work, notably our country-specific Studies on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade (RPBT).
- In November 2023, our WP.6 (Regulatory Cooperation and Harmonization) and our WP.7 (Agricultural Quality Standards) hosted dedicated sessions on the digital transformation: the Conference on “Continuous compliance of products with embedded AI or other technologies” and the Roundtable on “Sustainable food systems – digitalization and food loss and waste reduction”.

In addition, our UN/CEFACT work stream has had – for long – the digital transformation at its core. Recent examples supporting the digitalization of trade facilitation include:

- Our Package of Standards supporting the digitalization of data sharing along supply chains and trade routes using different modes of transport (e.g. air, rail, road, ship). This is also recognized in the Roadmap for the Digitalization of Multimodal Data and Document Exchange along the Trans-Caspian Corridor endorsed at the Summit of SPECA participating States in November 2023.

In response to the mandates emerging from UNECE’s 69th Commission session (April 2021), we have consolidated our work on the Circular Economy transition:

- Our Circular STEP network provides a vibrant stakeholder engagement platform for more than 25 government-nominated focal points. This includes 16 focal points from countries with economies in transition, many of whom met at our first Circular STEP Regional Dialogue in Belgrade, Serbia in October 2023.

Our normative machinery also provided a setting for member States to discuss Circular Economy initiatives, such as information exchange standards for Digital Product Passport (DPPs) (UN/CEFACT, November 2023) or suggestions for integrating Circular Economy considerations into UNECE Studies on RPBTs (Trade Committee, June 2023).

Our Sustainability Pledge, a flagship initiative supporting the traceability of environmental, social and governance (ESG) compliance in circular value chains, reached 100+ pledges from 750+ industry actors in the textiles and clothing sector. Our Sustainability Pledge toolbox was tested in 20 blockchain pilots covering 23 countries across the world. Our experts are working to replicate this initiative in the agri-food and critical raw materials (CRMs) sectors.

Our ECTD teams showcased UNECE’s Circular Economy contributions on numerous occasions, including during side events to the UNECE Commission session, or as part of the World Circular Economy Forum (WCEF), the OECD Due Diligence Forum, the WTO Public Forum, and others. Read more in our regular Circular STEP newsletters: Circular STEP | LinkedIn.

We have supported Ukraine’s efforts to mobilize financing for a resilient and sustainable reconstruction and to harness the power of innovation for sustainable development:

In 2023, we developed a way to apply our PIERS (PPP and Infrastructure Evaluation and Rating System) methodology flexibly and effectively in Ukraine. Our PIERS methodology was translated into Ukrainian, is referenced in Ukraine’s draft law No. 75088 and is being used in the assessment of several pilot reconstruction projects.

In June 2023, we launched our Interim Innovation Policy Outlook (I-IPO), where Ukraine is one of several beneficiary countries. Right now, we are conducting a country-specific Innovation for Sustainable Development Review (I4SDR) for Ukraine, supporting the country’s work on a National Strategy on Science, Technology and Innovation.

We have mainstreamed gender into different areas of our work:

Our newly established Team of Specialists (ToS) on Gender Responsive Standards (GRS) offers ways to make standards and standards development processes gender responsive, also captured in our publication on Why Gender-Responsive Standards are Better for Everyone.

In 2023, the ToS GRS developed a Code List for sex and gender in digitalized information exchange. The Code List also provides guidance on how this information could be requested and subsequently utilized.
In May 2023, UNECE’s Annual International PPP Forum, hosted in Athens, Greece, convened several sessions on gender equality and women’s empowerment in PPP modalities. In November 2023, our WP.PPP launched work on a practical guide on promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment through PPPs.

Our Working Parties (WPs), the core of our normative machinery produced numerous outcomes in their respective areas of work:

- WP.7 on Agricultural Quality Standards (November 2023), adopted three new and eight revised standards, including new standards for inshell pecans, pecan kernels, and certain small fruits, and a new recommendation (standard on trial) for sweet potatoes.
- WP.6 on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization (November 2023) adopted a revised Recommendation K on Metrological Assurance of Conformity Assessment and Testing, supporting countries to put in place well-functioning metrological processes.
- WP.PPP (December 2023) published a Legal Framework for PPPs in Support of the SDGs and a Practical Guide on PPPs for Sustainable Economic Recovery and Reconstruction in Support of the SDGs.

UN/CEFACT, another ECTD-serviced Working Party, with a focus on digital trade facilitation, had on the table for its 29th Plenary (November 2023):

- Recommendation No. 49 on Private Sector Participation in National Trade Facilitation Committees, supporting implementation of a mandatory provision of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement.
- Updates to UN/EDIFACT and UN/CCL, two information exchange standards that are crucial for cross-border paperless trade.
- Updates to UN/LOCODE, the UNECE website that is most frequently used, offering geographical coding for trade and transport locations.

Our PIERS methodology, adopted in May 2022:
- Was launched in an online self-assessment format, ready to use for PPP practitioners, government officials, NGOs and academia, the private sector and international organizations.
- Was translated into Ukrainian, is referenced in Ukraine’s draft law No. 75088 and is applied in selected reconstruction projects.
- Was used in more than 200 PPP projects. Close to 50 of these projects, from 33 countries and totaling a capital expenditure of 38.7 billion US dollars were presented at UNECE’s Annual International PPP Forum in Athens, Greece in May 2023.

Our Transformative Innovation Network (ETIN), launched in November 2022:

- Established the strategic foundations and governance structures for a unique network that strives to facilitate radical and disruptive innovation.
- Honed-in on the first two specific work streams: ecosystem development for transformative innovation and strategic learning for transformative innovation.
- Hosted 17 traditional and three live podcast (the latter for ETIN members only) discussing technologies, ideas, business models, and partnership arrangements that bring about fundamental changes to the way we consume or produce, creating social value.

Supporting UNECE Program Countries with Economies in Transition in Central Asia, Southern Caucasus, Western Balkan and Eastern Europe

In addition to numerous seminars and trainings on trade (including trade facilitation), infrastructure investment and innovation across the UNECE region, our policy analysis produced several country-specific and sub-regional reports. Examples include:

- Innovation for Development Review (I4SDR) of Armenia.
- Interim Innovation Policy Outlook (I-IPO) for Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus countries.
- Study on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade (RPBT), with a focus on trade facilitation for the Republic of Moldova.
- Summary of Lessons Learned from RPBT Studies since 2012 (demand-driven studies that were undertaken for over ten countries).
- Regional Report on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, based on the findings of the fifth edition of the UN’s Global Survey on Sustainable and Digital Trade Facilitation.

As part of our support to SPECA, the UN’s Special Program for Central Asia, we:

- Supported the servicing of the SPECA Week hosted by Azerbaijan and culminating in the SPECA Summit attended by five Heads of States.
- Contributed to backstopping the adoption of SPECA States’ Roadmap for the Digitalization of the Trans-Caspian Corridor.
- Serviced numerous SPECA Working Groups (WGs), notably the WG on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development and the WG on Trade.
Read more about UNECE’s Economic Cooperation and Trade Division in our Brochure, available at:

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