

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Keynote Statement

by

Ms. Olga Algayerova

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

**V4SDG Sustainability Exchange
23 September 2020 (remote participation)**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to talk to you today about sustainable development and to bring a UN perspective to your discussions. I'm very happy to see participation by different stakeholders at this event, governments, academia, private sector... Involvement by all of you is key to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Let me start this statement by talking about the pre-COVID times, which feel like a world away now. Back then, when I made statements about sustainable development, I used to talk about the need for political commitment to the 2030 Agenda. For awareness raising. For involvement at all levels of society. For cooperation and collaboration between all stakeholders.

Nowadays, times are different. The COVID-19 pandemic has struck our world and left a deep and multi-faceted impact. Nearly a million people have died worldwide. GDP has contracted significantly, leading several countries into their worst recessions since WWII. Unemployment and poverty are rising, with many unable to work. Socially, the crisis has created or compounded inequality. Students who cannot afford computers cannot access online education. Gender-based violence has risen in populations forced to spend more time at home. With many in informal employment losing their jobs, income inequality is exacerbated. More and more people are now being left behind. We need urgent solutions to address these problems.

In that context, you might wonder if I would now give you different messages than I did before the pandemic.

The answer is no.

Now, more than ever, the 2030 Agenda should remain our guiding light. If anything, I call for even stronger political commitment to it, and again for awareness raising, multi-stakeholder engagement, and working together.

The UN Secretary-General has identified recovery from COVID-19 as an opportunity to create more sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. We don't have to go back to our old habits. By aligning rebuilding efforts with the SDGs, we can indeed “build back better”. The SDGs are a great achievement with a forward-looking perspective. They offer us direction on how to redress challenges or prevent certain unwelcome developments.

In September 2019, the Secretary-General launched the Decade of Action to accelerate implementation of the SDGs. He called on all sectors of society to mobilize on three levels: **global action** to secure greater leadership, more resources and smarter solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals; **local action** embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities; and **people action**, including by youth, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia and other stakeholders, to generate an unstoppable movement pushing for the required transformations.

It is upon us to make the 2030 Agenda a reality – and do it now.

So, let us rethink, reconnect and rebuild – together.

Helping countries rebuild after crises is something UNECE has experience with: UNECE was founded in the wake of WWII, with the goal to promote economic cooperation and integration among the war-ravaged economies of the pan-European region. For over 70 years, and even during the height of the Cold War, we have been bringing the East and the West together to collaborate peacefully on technical norms and standards. We work in several fields such as transport, trade facilitation, statistics, environment, housing etc. This mandate remains as relevant as ever in the face of the current recession, and the need for subsequent rebuilding in alignment with the SDGs.

Governments are now issuing directives to many different sectors as they try to restart economic growth. I hope they use this opportunity to encourage the discontinuation of old, harmful habits and enact stronger policies and incentives. The SDGs provide an excellent foundation. Why? They facilitate connectivity, address transboundary and other risks, support a green and resilient recovery. I stress the word resilient: Implementing the SDGs means that we will be better prepared to respond to and recover from future crises. How?

Let me give you some examples from the work of UNECE:

As one of the five Regional Commission of the United Nations, we provide the political platform to develop joint responses in a multilateral context, based on broad, multidisciplinary technical expertise. Our work is demand driven and responsive to emerging trends. Through the collaboration of our 56 member States, and often even the larger UN family, it is more far-reaching and impactful than individual action.

Moreover, we can offer a number of instruments that are already a meaningful response framework to certain aspects of the COVID recovery:

We have a classification system for sustainable resource management, called UNFC. It applies to oil and gas; renewable energy; nuclear fuels; minerals and others, and reduces carbon footprint by optimizing their management. It also applies to secondary resources, thus helping the circular economy. UNFC supports several SDGs, such as SDG 7 on clean energy, SDG 10 on infrastructure, SDG 13 on climate action, etc. The EU notably uses UNFC to manage the critical raw materials needed for batteries, and financially supports our work. But UNFC is also relevant in the COVID context: Hospitals had shortages of critical medications such as anesthetics. And European manufacturing is hampered by a dependence on imports of active ingredients from China and India. Applying UNFC can secure the supply chains for these raw

materials used in the pharmaceutical industries. This is also relevant to mass-scale vaccine development.

As another example, we work on SDG2 (Zero Hunger) by tackling food loss and waste along the entire agricultural supply chain. In times of crisis, it is of course even more important to ensure food supply and avoid panic. Fortunately, the food supply in Europe was not greatly disturbed. This is not always the case on other continents, where limiting food waste becomes even more essential.

All of these efforts are in line with the trend towards circular economy that is gaining traction in the pan-European region. This trend is absolutely one that we need to follow: We have finite resources, and unless we incorporate circularity concerns into all phases of design, use, reuse, recycling and disposal, we will not reach the sustainable future that we want. This fact is being recognized throughout the region. The EU adopted a new Circular Economy Action Plan, this year, UNECE member States have decided that the theme of our next Commission session in April 2021 would be “Promoting circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region”. I hope that you will all join us at that session. Together, we will a course for accelerated deployment of circular economy in the years to follow.

As we move forward, I think it’s important to look at lessons learned from the pandemic, so that we don’t repeat our errors.

Perhaps most importantly, we see a need for governments to work together to reduce uncertainty, so that global risk management in all policy areas can be undertaken successfully.

There is need for a rights-based approach, to eradicate the inequalities I mentioned.

We witnessed that international cooperation can minimize disruption and cost. We needed some time, especially at the outset, to put international solidarity and multilateralism first in our responses.

Subsequently, our action aligned. Yet, there is scope for further improvement. I hope we will seize it together.

The pandemic has shown that we CAN do things to mitigate and possibly even prevent certain risks from materializing if we have the political will to act.

Yet, we must act upon our knowledge more decisively and swiftly. We had a lot of information in advance about potential risks –yet, we did not always act on it and lost precious lead time for risk avoidance and mitigating. This lesson is true not just for the pandemic, but also for the crisis of climate change, whose impact will simply dwarf that of COVID. We saw how suddenly the COVID crisis started. How quickly it mushroomed. Climate change will cause – indeed, it is already causing - hundreds of crises that start and grow just as fast. We need only to look at the forest fires that have devastated huge swaths of land this year, from Australia to halfway around the world in the United States, to know that this is true.

COVID-19 has shown that environmental disruptions can wreak havoc with the global economy. They can no longer be ignored. Policymakers need to factor in nature protection and restoration. If we want to protect future generations, we need governments to show the same kind of political will and decisive action to address climate change that we have seen in recent weeks. Citizens, businesses, all sectors of society must demand this from their governments.

Another – indeed very hopeful - lesson learned, is how quickly pollution trends were reversed around the world once polluting activities ceased: We can smell the cleaner air, and people in northern India could see the Himalayas for the first time in 30 years! We have the tools to mitigate and even reverse climate change. We just have to be willing to implement them.

I hope that the post COVID-19 leadership will be conscious of our vulnerability to crises and take steps to be better prepared, especially in terms of rapidly transitioning to a climate neutral economy. Circular

economy, a just transition to zero-carbon energy systems, building resilience and sustainability into public and private projects as well as PPPs, all of these are needed. UNECE can support governments by providing the technical tools to implement them.

The leadership should always keep an eye on the future, and focus on bolstering countries' innovation capacity to enhance sustainable growth. Innovation can contribute both to short-term pandemic response and to long term resilience. Again, we can provide you with the policies and tools to support this.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, let's remember that we are together in this. We need to implement the SDGs and leave no one behind. We can do that best by working with each other and by showing solidarity. UNECE's experience shows that collaboration is on technical issues is not just possible, but also the key to success. We have seen an erosion of confidence in multilateralism in the last few years. But without collaboration and coordination, countries will often work at cross-purposes and miss synergies. Therefore I urge all leadership to make full use of the collaborative platform that is the UN. We are at your service. Together, I have no doubt that we can reach the future we hope for.

Thank you.