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Statement

by

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at

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Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here to talk about the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the region. I thank the government of Turkmenistan for this invitation.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE for short) is one of the five Regional Commissions of the UN. We bring together governments and other stakeholders for multilateral development of technical standards and norms, in a variety of areas related to sustainable development. Our goal is to promote pan-European economic integration and support the achievement of the SDGs. Our membership covers all the countries of the former Soviet Union, Europe, Israel, Turkey, USA and Canada.

At the regional level, UNECE is the convenor of the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development for the UNECE region, which brings countries together to exchange experiences regarding the implementation of the SDGs, take stock of where we are, and identify obstacles. I would like to share with you some of the findings from this Forum.

In the UNECE region, progress towards the SDGs has been mixed, across goals and subregions. A common trend across the region is increasing inequality (SDG 10), thus betraying the ambition of

leaving no one behind. For example, the share of young people not working or studying remains elevated. Young people are most at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Inequality has a strong gender component (SDG 5), which hinders progress towards multiple SDGs. A big gender pay gap persists. Activity rates are lower for women than for men, with the difference being particularly large in the West Balkans and some CIS countries. Precarious forms of employment are more prevalent. And technological developments may create further labour market tensions.

Inequality among countries also matters: over the last decade, the pace of income convergence across countries in the region has slowed down or reversed. Many middle-income countries have rather volatile growth rates. For some countries, the weight of commodities or the dependence on external finance remain sources of vulnerability. In Central Asia, the potential of international and subregional trade to contribute to economic dynamism and economic diversification remains unfulfilled.

SDG 9 focuses on improved infrastructure. This is required to address multiple SDGs, including those related to economic growth and environmental sustainability, where often a cross-border dimension is present. In particular, better transport links contribute to economic integration and increased prosperity. More work remains to be done here. In many countries in the CIS and the West Balkans,

improvements in infrastructure have been significant, but, overall, current levels are low.

The environment-related goals remain out of reach for many countries. Progress in decoupling economic expansion from environmental degradation (SDG 8.4) is still insufficient. The overall material footprint per capita remains high. Threats to biodiversity (SDG 15) are an important concern, in particular in high-income countries.

Progress in reducing air pollution has had a positive impact on health. However, in the West Balkans and the CIS, air pollution remains a significant problem, that requires concerted action. Further advances are also required in other health related areas. For example, we are not on track to meet SDG 3.6: halving the number of people killed in road accidents by 2020.

Continued advances have been observed on climate action (SDG 13), amid generalized increases in energy productivity (SDG 7.3). Although the share of renewables has displayed a positive trend, there are large differences across the region, and it remains very low in the CIS. Climate finance from this region has displayed a growing trend but more resources are still required. Overall, none of the UNECE countries has taken sufficient action to combat climate change and, in some cases, the gap is critically large. Mobilizing investments and

harnessing the potential of trade and regional economic integration can support development that is more equitable and decoupled from environmental degradation. Climate action needs to be scaled up and key groups such as consumers, civil society and youth need to be further mobilized. It is also necessary to address growing climate risks in the region in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. I call on all the governments of the region to bring concrete, realistic plans to the Climate Summit which the UN Secretary-General will convene this September in New York.

While the region has overall good education (SDG 4) indicators, the commitment to leave no one behind is not fully honoured, thus contributing to the reproduction of inequalities (target 4.5.1). A significant rural-urban divide exists in most countries and low socio-economic status is a major predictor of educational underperformance. The integration of migrants through access to quality education pose challenges. Adult participation in learning is limited. Yet, given rapid technological change, more attention is required to lifelong learning.

SDG16 is peace, justice and strong institutions. Here, whole-of-society approaches are necessary to ensure effective SDG implementation. Civil society, the private sector, academia, community-based organizations, volunteers, and activists all have important roles in this regard. Public rights to access information and justice and participate in decision-making in environmental matters, as

enshrined in the UNECE Aarhus Convention, are essential to respond to pressing environmental challenges.

Before I finish, let me mention three overarching issues.

The first is the interlinked nature of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs are integrated and indivisible. Our approach must be coordinated if we are to achieve them, and the same goes for mitigating climate change. I encourage you to carefully consider intersectoral, multi-stakeholder initiatives to address such interlinkages. At UNECE, we navigate this complexity by bringing together the efforts of our different sectoral divisions to exploit synergies, break vertical silos, and increase cooperation and communication. This leads to better results and greater impact. A recent example is our standards for energy efficiency in buildings, which are the result of a joint effort by our Committee on Housing and our Committee on Sustainable Energy. As buildings cause 40% of all GHG emissions, implementing these standards contributes to both the SDGs and climate change mitigation.

A second overarching issue is data. The SDG targets and indicators create significant data demands. We need this to identify gaps, measure progress, and adjust policies as needed based on observation of previous results. While the region has progressed in the availability of SDG data, there is also a clear need to improve the disaggregation of data to give a fuller picture on the groups left behind.

The third overarching issue is financing. We will need unprecedented resources to achieve the SDGs, and private sector involvement will be absolutely necessary. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are one method for fostering this involvement. In the past, PPPs have often been poorly designed and implemented, and failed. UNECE develops standards and guidelines that policy makers, at city level and beyond, can use to address the issues. We have recently designed guidelines for what we call “People-first PPPs”, which put the needs of people front and centre. These guidelines are aligned with the SDGs and promote PPPs that fight poverty, preserve the environment, improve access and mitigate inequality. They lead to projects that can be replicated, multiplying impact and the ability to scale up the use of successful PPP models. UNECE is happy to support countries in implementing these guidelines.

Thank you.
