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Statement

by

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at the 2020 High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) session

“Bolstering local action to control the pandemic and accelerate implementation”

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Over the past months, we have witnessed the outbreak of an unprecedented pandemic. In dense urban areas, the COVID-19 crisis was felt particularly strong and local governments were on the frontlines of the battle.

As cities are increasingly crucial actors in the international arena and as the United Nations are marking their 75th anniversary, **it is vital to demonstrate that we are working towards a more effective multilateralism – and including local actors is a must.**

To walk the talk of a new multilateralism, UNECE will convene the UN's first Forum of Mayors to bring together city leaders from the pan-European region in Geneva and online on 6 October 2020. Under the broader topic of urban resilience, mayors will share their experiences in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and other emergencies, and will present some innovative practices to “build back better”.

In the same effort, UNECE is teaming up with the other Regional Commissions, supported by UN-Habitat and UNCDF, to strengthen capacities of local governments for economic and financial recovery and rebuilding. Together, we are collecting and sharing experiences of COVID-19 local responses and making good practices available to support preparation of local rebuilding plans.

To combat the spread of the virus, Governments adopted measures that often included restrictions on the freedoms of assembly and movement. This altered the way in which numerous rights are exercised: for example, urban planning and development projects could be implemented without proper public involvement. We should not accept this lowering of standards for effective public participation as a result of COVID-19. Instead, we need to enhance local governance and institutionalize the engagement of the public.

With only ten years left to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is important to recognize the key role of cities as drivers for a sustainable transformation and local authorities are eager to demonstrate their contribution to attaining the Goals.

UNECE carries out projects to improve the evaluation of city performance against the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for Smart and Sustainable Cities, a global standard to measure SDGs at the local level. It provides a solid basis for the development of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR). ECA, ESCAP, ECLAC and ESCWA are similarly working to deliver solutions in their respective regions, and to encourage VLRs so that local initiatives and actions are recognized and can be shared.

I firmly believe that local actors can contribute a wealth of expertise and tools to reach the SDGs within this decade. **I and all the regional commission executives stand ready to bolster local SDG action where possible.**

Let me end with an invitation: I would encourage you all to join us at the Forum of Mayors at the Palais des Nations in Geneva or online on 6 October 2020 and see for yourself what bolstering local action looks like.

Thank you.

ANNEX

Optional material for use in the second round of discussion

based on the input from all Regional Commissions

[CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AT FRONTLINE OF RESPONSE TO COVID]

- In dense urban areas, the COVID-19 crisis was felt particularly strong and hit the most vulnerable groups of society hardest. As the virus was spreading, **local governments were on the frontlines of addressing this pandemic**. The crisis demonstrated that some of the most pressing challenges humanity faces – be it the outbreaks of pandemics or climate change – cannot be solved by national governments alone. As **our world is growing increasingly urban** – with some 75% of the population already living in cities in the UNECE region / 81 % in Latin America and the Caribbean region – cities will become even more engaged in the frontlines of addressing these key challenges.
- There is no doubt that the **multilateral system has to adapt to these new realities as cities are increasingly crucial actors in the international arena**. As we are marking the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, it is vital to demonstrate that we are working towards a more effective multilateralism – and **including local actors is a must**.

[STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN COVID RESPONSE]

- **Proximity and density** turned cities quickly into the transmission hotspots of the novel Corona virus. COVID-19 revealed the extreme economic and financial vulnerability of cities and local governments globally - without exception. At the same time, thanks to the **proximity to their constituencies, local governments have a better understanding of needs and necessary measures and enable higher transparency of accountability**. They are best positioned to respond to local needs. Cities and local governments already lead responses to some of the immediate effects of COVID-19. However, they cannot do this alone. We need to bolster local action to control the pandemic.

[KEY LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC FOR CITIES]

- If there is only one lesson to learn from this crisis, it is **that rapid change of our urban reality is possible, behaviour patterns can be adapted**, and humans can stand in unprecedented solidarity for a common cause.

[UPHOLDING DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS - ECE]

- As a response to the pandemic, we observe that Governments have adopted different measures for weathering the pandemic, walking the thin line between public health and civil liberties. Overnight, we have seen the closure of borders, the cancellation of meetings and gatherings, the shutting down of public spaces and public institutions and the transferal online of services. Consequently, there has been an **impact on procedural rights of public access to information, participation in decision-making and access to justice.**
- Deadlines, hearings and public comment periods have been postponed or moved online. This means that major urban development projects could be implemented without proper public involvement. This restriction of public rights should be considered cautiously. It should adhere to international commitments, be limited to narrow circumstances, such as the duration of the lockdown, be proportionate to the pandemic situation and non-discriminatory and by no means put the rights themselves in jeopardy.
- At this critical time, we shall not forget our commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, **in particular that of Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.** We should all uphold standards and procedures for effective public participation. The United Nations stands ready to support national and local governments in their efforts and act as platform to share experience and lessons learnt from other regions.

[STRENGTHENED PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN ARAB REGION - ESCWA]

- **Across the Arab world,** we have seen examples of local leadership swiftly and effectively implementing protocols and mobilizing efforts in response to the pandemic.
- The challenge going forward is how to enhance local governance and institutionalize the engagement of the general public and grassroots movements to ensure that the potential for action exhibited during this pandemic is carried forward.

[LOCAL ECONOMIES GREEN RECOVERY - ECLAC]

- In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, **already existing social vulnerabilities in the Latin American and the Caribbean Region have become more evident:** The impact on local economies is considerable, with urban areas facing massive job loss and

unemployment, reduction in the revenues of local governments and large productivity losses in the urban economy.

- Within the Latin American and Caribbean region this is even more critical, as a **vast portion of the workforce rely solely on the informal sector and have no forms of social security to fall back on**. For others, teleworking has been an option during the pandemic, but the **persistence of the digital divide** will worsen inequalities if not properly addressed.
- The complexities involved in the planning and management of the urban processes of the cities in the global South proposes a great challenge, but there is a **renewed role for local governments in facing the post-pandemic recovery in cities to foster a more sustainable development and building more resilient urban systems**.
- By promoting a **Green Recovery at the urban level in the LAC region**, local authorities can foster a *build back better* approach that can **support the local economy** through job creation, development of local skills and promoting knowledge transfers on innovation. **A Big Push for Sustainability** could also be implemented through the provision of water and sanitation infrastructure and smart urban electromobility that responds to the demand of Latin American and Caribbean cities by using inputs and equipment manufactured in the Region. The construction of new social housing as well as rehabilitation and expansions could employ carbon efficient building materials as well as using vacant land in consolidated areas of the city.

[INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS AND BUILDING BACK BETTER - ECE]

- As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries requested their citizen to ‘stay at home’ to stay safe. Not for everyone home is actually a safe place. Housing conditions and density of informal settlements often do not allow residents to follow basic hygienic measures or to keep the minimum social distance to reduce spreading the virus. This has presented a major challenge for local governments to tackle, where the lack of provision in basic services, waste collection, access to adequate housing, integrated mobility systems and access to health facilities are even more exacerbated and highlights the vulnerability of its communities.
- The **legalization of informal buildings needs to be part of post-COVID recovery plans**. Integrating informal constructions into formal land markets not only provides clear ownership and security of tenure. It also provides economic security to residents as

it opens access to credits and mortgages - and encourages residents to invest in their homes. Moreover, formalized settlements can be upgraded and connected with basic services and infrastructure to raise the living standard to a level that allows residents to live in adequate and healthy homes. UNECE is working intensively in this area. For instance it recently launched the 'Guidelines for the Formalization of Informal Constructions', jointly prepared by UNECE Working Party on Land Administration and the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG): Formalization is a tool to increase security of tenure and ownership rights but also to protect and promote human rights. It thus contributes directly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

[LOCAL ACTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, SDG 11]

- SDG 11 provides a clear set of targets and indicators for making cities and human settlements more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. But city action is not only critical for the achievement of SDG 11 – it is crucial to reach all 17 SDGs by 2030. In fact, large parts of the SDG targets need to be delivered by local authorities and actors.
- Until now, the review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on the achievements of countries. **Local authorities are eager to demonstrate their contribution to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals.**

[LOCAL VOLUNTARY REVIEWS IN UNECE REGION - ECE]

- UNECE carries out smart cities projects that aim at improving the resilience of cities in Albania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, and other countries. The projects are based on the evaluation of the city performance against the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for Smart and Sustainable Cities, the global standard that allows measuring SDGs at the local level. The standard was developed jointly by UNECE and ITU. The evaluation allows collecting data about the achievements of cities in attaining the SDGs. The KPI for Smart and Sustainable Cities standard provides a solid basis for the development of Voluntary Local Reviews.
- Thanks to this process, local governments can assess how they contribute to national and global sustainable development objectives. They can assess and strengthen the adequacy of local policies and institutions, and mobilize the stakeholder support towards a collaborative implementation of the goals and many others.

[LOCAL VOLUNTARY REVIEWS IN AFRICA - ECA]

- In Africa, Voluntary local reviews were critical in ensuring ownership, accountability and the commitment of all stakeholders, at all levels. Voluntary local reviews were recognized as important tools for meaningful multistakeholder engagement and mobilization to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.
- It is then crucial to promote effective devolution and provide local authorities with tools and adequate resources to enable them to localize and implement the goals in the context of their local sustainable development priorities;
- African countries are convinced by the importance to integrate, with the assistance of the United Nations development system, local development and urban issues in national and key sectoral development plans, policies and budgetary instruments;
- The United Nations system should assist in the development of a common template for voluntary local reviews for ease of integration and standardization of those reviews.

[POTENTIAL OF LOCAL VOLUNTARY REVIEWS]

- I firmly believe that local actors can contribute a wealth of expertise and tools to reach the SDGs within this decade. Let us use this potential and signal to our member States that we are ready to adapt our practices in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world.

[FORUM OF MAYORS - ECE]

- The UN's first Forum of Mayors will bring together city leaders from Europe, North America, Central Asia and the Caucasus in Geneva and online on 6 October 2020. While local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has taken the immediate focus in many cities, **the Forum will also give space to discuss long-term resilience strategies in cities**, including actions mitigating the effects of climate change and natural hazards. How are influential cities like Athens, Helsinki, Kazan, Kiev or Tashkent navigating through the pandemic? How did the city of Tirana manage the recovery after a disastrous earthquake? All these insights by mayors will feed into the decision-making process of the UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management, an intergovernmental body that can provide policy guidance to member States.

So please join us at the Forum of Mayors at the Palais des Nations in Geneva or online on 6 October 2020.