



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 April 2020

English
Original: English, French and
Russian

Advance unedited version

Economic Commission for Europe

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE Region

Fourth session

Geneva, 19 March 2020

Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region on its fourth session¹

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¹ In light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the 2020 Regional Forum was held as a virtual meeting.

I. Format of the session

1. The fourth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region took place on 19 March 2020. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was held as a virtual meeting without physical presence of participants. The session was chaired by Ambassador Vaqif Sadiqov, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva.
2. The session was attended virtually through an online platform by over 300 representatives of ECE member States, United Nations and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations and representatives of academia, the private sector and other organizations.²

II. Opening and adoption of the agenda

3. The Regional Forum adopted the revised provisional agenda for the session, contained in ECE/RFSD/2020/1/Rev.2.
4. In his opening remarks, the Chair emphasized that all current attention is necessarily directed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus. Notwithstanding these difficult circumstances, the Regional Forum represents an opportunity to continue the dialogue on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is the objective of the online discussion to take away some inspiration and ideas on how to speed up progress towards the 2030 Agenda. In the fifth year of the SDGs, it is clear that more decisive action and acceleration of progress is needed in the decade to come.
5. Referring to the national context in Azerbaijan, the Chair stressed that the national coordination council for sustainable development was established in 2016, headed by one of the Vice Prime Ministers. The council is responsible for providing policy advice to decision-makers to better mainstream, implement, monitor and report on SDG progress. Azerbaijan identified a number of areas as SDG accelerators, including the labour market, green growth, enhancing public services, gender equality, youth, social protection and early childhood development. Azerbaijan was one of the first countries to prepare a set of principles for its SDG nationalization efforts.
6. In her opening remarks, the Deputy Secretary-General characterized the coronavirus pandemic as a threat to the world's most vulnerable people, the global economy and the progress that governments have been making since the SDGs were agreed in 2015. The challenge is now to get the crisis response right in order to make good on the decade of action to deliver the SDGs once the crisis is over.
7. Over the past years, policy-makers and societies as a whole have become more aware of the need for sustainable development. Many actors are joining in and helping to strengthen the momentum, such as investors, innovators, young people, cities and communities. At the same time, the broad and deep transformative change that the 2030 Agenda promised has not happened yet.
8. Action in three areas in particular will be instrumental. Firstly, a broad mobilization of all actors and partners is required, with governments leading the way and more sectors of society joining in. Young people in particular are a substantial force for positive change, already placing climate change and inclusive sustainable development higher up the political agenda. Secondly, there is a need to raise ambition, including governments meeting their commitments for international development cooperation, climate finance and climate action. Thirdly, game-changing solutions and breakthrough innovations will help deliver concrete results at scale.

² A part of the participants recorded their remote participation through a sign-in sheet, which is available on the website of the regional forum (www.uncece.org/rfsd.html).

9. The UN will help tackle these difficult issues. A reformed UN Resident Coordinator System and a new generation of UN Country Teams now offer a stronger and more cohesive platform to provide governments with integrated policy and programmatic support, centered around strategic UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. The support of Member States in these reforms is greatly appreciated. An ambitious process to reposition the UN Development System at the regional level is also being concluded to foster collaboration on sustainable development across all entities of the UN Development System operating at the regional level.

10. The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe expressed her gratitude that participants accepted and engaged in the virtual format of the regional forum in the current challenging context. She underscored that the UN is supporting countries in addressing the economic and social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. The situation is calling for solidarity, multilateralism and joint engagement.

11. With regard to SDG action, she stressed that SDGs are very much interconnected. Therefore, ECE has adopted a cross-sectoral nexus approach that generates integrated solutions and sets examples. ECE is well recognized for its normative, standard-setting and policy work in the region and beyond. Looking ahead, ECE will focus its attention on progress towards a circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources, which is planned to be the theme of the ECE Commission session in April 2021. It is evident that there is a need to rethink the way in which societies produce and consume and generate new economic opportunities. In addition, resource mobilization will be crucial. An important example is the UN Road Safety Fund, which has managed to mobilize about \$20 million in a short time.

III. Session 1: Accelerating action and delivery for sustainable development in the Economic Commission for Europe region³

12. The following speakers intervened during session 1:

- Professor Katherine Richardson, Member of the Independent Group of Scientists for the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) and Leader of the Sustainability Science Centre at the University of Copenhagen (*keynote speaker*)
- Ms. Lidia Bratanova, Director, ECE Statistical Division
- Ms. Tina Hocevar, Vice-President, European Youth Forum
- Mr. Crispin Conroy, Representative Director, International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) in Geneva
- Ms. Ena Peeva, EDUACTIVE, Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (RCEM)

IV. Session 2: Accelerating Sustainable Development Goals through Voluntary National Reviews³

13. The following speakers intervened during session 2:

- Mr. László Borbély, State Counsellor to the Prime Minister, Government of Romania
- Mr. Jacques Ducrest, Delegate of the Federal Council for the 2030 Agenda of Switzerland
- Ms. Sehnaz Kiyamaz, Women for Women's Human Rights, Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (RCEM)

³ All speakers provided their interventions through remote connection. The Chair's summary in Annex I to the present report presents the main issues raised during the session. Written statements are available on the website of the Regional Forum (www.unece.org/rfsd.html).

V. Session 3: Actions for green and inclusive change³

14. The following speakers intervened during session 3:
- Mr. Luca Marmo, Environment Directorate-General, European Commission: The European Green Deal and the new Circular Economy Action Plan
 - Ms. Outi Honkatukia, Chief Negotiator for Climate Change, Ministry of the Environment, Finland: Finland - carbon neutrality by 2035
 - Ms. Monika Skadborg, President, Danish Youth Council: The Youth Climate Council as channel of youth engagement in Denmark
 - Ms. Paola Deda, Director, ECE Forests, Land and Housing Division: The Trees in Cities Challenge

VI. Session 4: Economic transformation, finance and technology for Sustainable Development Goals acceleration³

15. The following speakers intervened during session 4:
- Mr. Bruno Pozzi, Director of the Europe Office of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP)
 - Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director, Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
 - Ms. Marianne Haahr, Director, Sustainable Digital Finance Alliance
 - Mr. Steven Stone, Chief, Resources and Markets Branch, Economy Division, UN Environment Programme (UNEP)

VII. Closing

16. In her closing remarks, the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe thanked all member States of the region for their support in holding the regional forum in this virtual format. Despite the circumstances, a substantive discussion and a dialogue about accelerating sustainable development in the region took place. It is necessary to find new ways to carry out human economic activities, such as a circular economy and reusing resources. Currently, only less than 10 per cent of natural resources that are extracted are recycled back into the economy, which is a serious challenge. In the current public health crisis, maintaining connectivity is also essential. Border shutdowns that might disrupt transport and the distribution of food, medical and humanitarian aid would not be an adequate way to react to the crisis.

17. Before closing the meeting, the Chair informed participants that in follow-up to this session of the Regional Forum, a report with a Chair's summary of the discussions will be submitted to this year's High-level Political Forum. The draft report will be distributed to all governments through the diplomatic channels and will be available for comments on the website for all other participants.

Annex I

Chair's summary of the discussions

Session 1: Accelerating action and delivery for sustainable development in the Economic Commission for Europe region

1. The session heard two major substantive inputs that helped frame the discussions across the different sessions of the virtual Regional Forum: the key messages of the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) as well as the main findings of the Regional SDG Progress Report launched prior to the Regional Forum. In addition, key messages were presented from three main groups of stakeholders: youth, the private sector and civil society.
2. Introducing the 2019 GSDR and its implications for the ECE region, the keynote speaker, Professor Richardson, emphasized at the outset that the earth's resources are finite and that non-degradable waste has been accumulating on the planet and in the oceans. This has been well known for a long time. Consequently, frameworks and agreements have been put in place for a number of related and other issues, such as biodiversity, climate, and water. It is an achievement of the SDGs to bring all of this into one single framework.
3. On the one hand, many SDGs that relate to people are well on track. On the other hand, SDGs related to the planet and the environment are performing poorly, and trends are even moving in the wrong direction. The fundamental interaction within the SDGs is therefore how to equally share the earth's resources among a global population of 9 to 10 billion people.
4. The 2019 GSDR identified four levers that can help relieve the pressure on the available resources: science and technology; the economic and financial system; governance structures; and collective and individual behavior. It is important to note that technology alone will not solve the problem, but it can support using resources more efficiently. Science and technology should be combined with changes in all of the other levers.
5. The 2019 GSDR also identified six different thematic entry points in which the levers will need to trigger changes: strengthening human well-being and capabilities; shifting towards sustainable and just economies; building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns; achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy; promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development; and securing the global environmental commons.
6. In Europe, no country is on track to achieving the SDGs. The region faces considerable challenges in particular on climate action, life below water and life on land (SDGs 13, 14 and 15). The region has an enormous environmental footprint that urgently needs to be reduced. The central goal in the region and beyond must be to maximize human welfare at a minimum environmental cost.
7. Introducing the first ECE regional report on SDG progress, the Director of the ECE Statistical Division, Ms. Bratanova, emphasized that the report will help focus efforts at the beginning of the decade of action. The report comes at a key juncture in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. The 2030 Agenda cannot be fulfilled without relevant and timely statistics to track progress, to monitor the results and the impact of policy actions, as well as for identifying areas, groups, or regions that risk being left behind.
8. The report is designed to bring the existing statistical data on ECE countries closer to the users, provide explanations on the indicators, and show the extent of progress made and the variation among countries in the region. The SDGs include 232 global indicators, which are of varying relevance in different parts of the region. Prior to launching the report, ECE launched a dashboard of SDG indicators that provides a valuable regional perspective on the global indicators.
9. Overall, the report on SDG progress in the region provides a statistical portrait of progress and challenges. It was prepared by the ECE Statistical Division, based on a mandate

from the 2019 session of the Economic Commission for Europe. It describes the levels and trends of the 49 selected indicators relevant for the region for which data is available for most countries in our region. These 49 indicators cover all SDGs and examine change over the recent years.

10. Overall, ECE countries are making good progress in many of the areas addressed in the report, such as eradicating extreme poverty; maternal, infant and child mortality; sanitation; and lowering the energy intensity of the economy. At the same time, more needs to be done in areas such as air pollution; protection of marine areas; development assistance; and disaster risk reduction strategies.

11. On gender equality, SDG target 5.5 calls for women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The global indicator framework focuses on women in parliament, local government, and managerial positions. The share of women parliamentarians increased between 2015 and 2019. But only four countries in the ECE region (Sweden, Finland, Spain and Norway) have more than 40 per cent women among members of parliament, which could be considered a level close to gender parity. Similarly, only four countries in the ECE region (Belarus, France, Iceland and Sweden) have a share of women among government representatives that is close to gender parity. The proportion of women among managers has increased since 2012 in 32 out of 47 countries for which data is available, but the share of women among managers exceeded 40 per cent in only seven countries in 2017.

12. Another important example is air pollution. Air pollution is the most significant environmental risk to human health. However, only ten countries in the ECE region have levels of air pollution with fine particulate matter below the limit recommended by the WHO air quality guidelines.

13. The findings of the report will be valuable for the national efforts towards achieving the SDGs. The 49 selected SDG indicators provide valuable information about progress and shortcomings, even though they do not represent the full picture.

14. Voicing the concerns of youth, Ms. Hocevar stressed the need for decisive action to progress on SDGs, but also to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, which exposes many vulnerabilities of societies. The welfare of the older persons and those in frail health is affected disproportionately by the coronavirus. Vulnerable population groups should be at the centre of political attention, rather than the closing of borders, segregation, isolation, and centralized control. There is a need to transform the current economic and political system to address the deep-rooted values crisis in society. A new system based on human rights, open-mindedness and cooperation will contribute to more equal societies better able to tackle future crises.

15. Mr. Conroy stressed the important contribution the private sector can make to SDG progress, including on innovative finance and around climate change. He expressed the hope that the SDG Business Dialogue which the UN Global Compact and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) had planned to organize at the Regional Forum could be held at another occasion.

16. The ICC is the world's largest business organization with over 45 million institutional members worldwide. It is the only private sector organization to be admitted to the UN General Assembly as an observer. The ICC is taking a leading role in mainstreaming and accelerating climate change action among businesses. One concrete initiative is the Chambers Climate Coalition. Launched in 2019, the coalition commits to advocate for climate action within the ICC business networks, to support the goal of achieving net-zero emissions globally by 2050, and to mainstream climate mitigation and resilience guidance into chamber services. The coalition also provides an opportunity to showcase the role of small businesses in promoting the transition to a cleaner planet.

17. Speaking for civil society, Ms. Peeva said that the ongoing pandemic is exposing existing weaknesses in infrastructure as well as in the health and care systems, and the failure to reach certain marginalized groups such as older people living alone or people with disabilities. She stressed that civil society held an accessible full-fledged virtual civil society

forum on the day preceding the Regional Forum, with 170 registered participants from 29 countries.

18. Regarding SDG progress, civil society organizations agreed that all people must be reached by policy measures. Life-course policy-making is needed that is based on a commitment to include everyone from all walks of life and age. Moreover, the implementation of the human rights framework must be at the core of policy-making and financing. This is not the case at the moment as reflected by the patchy access of citizens of the region to the right to health, decent work, social security, shelter, food, water and sanitation, clean energy, education, and justice.

19. Against this backdrop, civil society put forward a number of priority recommendations. Governments in the ECE region and worldwide are called upon to put in place urgent economic stimulus plans and social protection and social care measures to protect the health and the income of workers and communities through coordinated multilateral responses in view of the COVID-19 crisis. With regard to human rights, equality, justice and non-discrimination, a cross-cutting human rights-based approach to SDGs is essential particularly to ensure the full access to human rights for people from marginalized groups. Promoting sustainable and just economies, decent work and implementing universal social protection systems are among the most effective measures to tackle poverty and inequality across generations.

20. On peace, civic space and democratic governance, it is crucial to strengthen the role of women in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and conflict and violence prevention. The democratic participation and active inclusion of all, especially of discriminated and marginalized groups, and fully accessible processes (e.g. in national sign languages and in other accessible formats) are also essential. Special financing mechanisms are needed for empowering and building resilience for survivors of all forms of violence, conflict and natural disasters. In the area of climate justice, decarbonization and just transition, civil society recommends setting up an intergenerational commission to tackle the rollback of climate justice and oversee the implementation of climate agreements. At the global level, the democratization of global economic governance and systemic reforms to ensure means of implementation through decoupling GDP growth from environmental degradation and integrate human rights into trade mechanisms are needed.

Session 2: Accelerating Sustainable Development Goals through Voluntary National Reviews

21. Session 2 provided an opportunity for discussion and exchange of experiences on the contribution of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the implementation of the SDGs. The session also aimed at identifying main lessons learnt from the VNR exercise as a whole and ways to improve VNRs in the next cycle of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) with a view to ensuring that they contribute more effectively to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

22. Member States from the ECE region are very active in the VNR exercise. 54 out of the 56 UNECE member States will have undertaken a VNR by 2020, which accounts for more than 95 per cent of the membership. At the 2020 HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC, 13 member States (5 for the second time) from the UNECE region will be presenting their Voluntary National Reviews.

23. The Chair underscored that Azerbaijan has presented two VNRs at the HLPF in 2017 and 2019. The experience of Azerbaijan suggests that the implementation of SDGs and national development strategies are mutually reinforcing. Strong political commitment to SDG implementation at the national level is a prerequisite for identifying opportunities for social and economic development and speedy transition to innovation policies and modernization in a country.

24. Sharing the experiences and views of Romania with regard to VNRs, Mr. Borbély highlighted that Romania presented the first Voluntary National Review at the HLPF in New York in July 2018. The VNR process has demonstrated the need for national coordination of

the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a systemic approach. After its first VNR, Romania revised its Sustainable Development Strategy 2030, involving in this process all political actors, civil society, the private sector, and the scientific community.

25. Furthermore, a Department of Sustainable Development was established within the Office of the Prime Minister of Romania. The department is responsible for strengthening the national institutional framework for SDG implementation, and a number of measures have been taken in this regard. At the level of the Government of Romania, the Interdepartmental Committee on Sustainable Development is one of the key institutions for policy coherence. The committee comprises ministers and is headed by the Prime Minister.

26. With regard to the VNR exercise in general, Mr. Borbély considered the VNRs a very good tool. In follow-up to the VNRs, a proper monitoring system is crucial to track progress and policy impact. For countries presenting a second VNR, a feedback loop between the two exercises could be a good opportunity to highlight progress and to avoid the repetition of previously reported data. The 2020 HLPF will be an opportunity to take stock of the VNR process so far and to take decisions for the next cycle. This should also include decisions on those targets of the 2030 Agenda that are expiring in 2020.

27. On behalf of Switzerland, Mr. Ducrest affirmed that the national VNR process has allowed to identify specific challenges in implementing the SDGs and possible solutions to address them. Firstly, sustainable development is not a specific policy sector in the exclusive competence of one minister. The VNR process leads to an exchange of experiences, lessons learned, and fosters new partnerships. It brings ministries to the table to discuss the state of implementation of the 2030 Agenda in their own policy sectors. This exchange should even go further and ministries should decide together about the maximization of co-benefits and the management of trade-offs between different policies and interests. This includes questions such as the right balance between trade and environment or between agriculture and biodiversity.

28. Secondly, the Swiss Government decided in 2019 to create a new organizational structure, the so-called Steering Committee Agenda 2030. This Committee along with the preparations for the VNR should help overcome the traditional silo approach in favor of a whole-of-government approach, both with regard to the national and international implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

29. On the VNR presentation, Mr. Ducrest emphasized the need to not only share success stories but speak more honestly about the challenges faced in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Such a fair and open approach could encourage transparency by others and create a sense of mutual learning. The ongoing HLPF review is a good opportunity to jointly develop creative ideas. For a more transparent approach to the VNRs, it is important to have more structured discussions, including a peer learning system. Scientists and statisticians could help policy-makers to make sound decisions. VNRs should therefore reflect their data and views about the progress made between two VNRs and the impact of policy measures. With regard to data, the third UN World Data Forum will be held in Bern, Switzerland from 18 to 20 October 2020.

30. The Russian Federation shared some key features and lessons learnt from the preparation of its first VNR to be presented at the 2020 HLPF through a written statement.⁴ The main institution charged with preparing the VNR is the Analytical Center for the Government of the Russian Federation (ACG), which is working closely with the Ministry of Economic Development, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal State Statistic Service (Rosstat) on preparing the VNR. Seventeen thematic working groups were established, one for each SDG. These groups included representatives of government bodies, local and regional authorities, civil society organizations, academic and research institutions as well as the private sector.

31. A key lesson from the VNR process in the Russian Federation was that policies aimed at achieving the SDGs and an overall sustainable development policy with balanced attention

⁴ Available at: www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/RCM_Website/Russia_s_First_VNR_Remarks_by_A.Tsvetov.pdf

to economic, social and environmental factors is achievable within an integrated approach to national planning. Another important lesson is that more attention should be paid to raising the level of awareness about SDGs among both policy practitioners and the public. Moreover, an intensified dialogue between government and the private sector has proven useful.

32. On behalf of civil society, Ms. Kiyamaz stressed that the SDGs can only be achieved through solidarity, transparent and reliable information, and cooperation. In some countries, the VNR processes are still very centralized and limited to government actors without broader engagement of civil society. It is encouraging, however, that in many countries civil society is engaged in the VNR process.

33. In many countries, strong civil society platforms exist that are monitoring SDG progress. Civil society organizations are working with governments and parliamentarians on the VNRs and on the longer-term follow-up. Shadow reports and statements are issued and joint meetings are taking place, for example, in North Macedonia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Finland, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Slovenia.

34. One key challenge emanating from the VNR processes is the lack of taking into account the regional and global human rights monitoring mechanisms, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the work of the Human Rights Council. There is a need to strengthen access to equal justice for all, and increased accountability through VNRs is the way to achieve this.

35. Civil society organizations need increased resources, time and opportunities to engage with the review process of the VNRs, both at the regional and global levels, which will require more financing. Furthermore, VNR countries should hold follow-up meetings with civil society after their VNR presentation to ensure the implementation of SDGs with the full engagement of all segments of society.

Session 3: Actions for green and inclusive change

36. Session 3 highlighted selected acceleration actions that were submitted for discussion by member States and other stakeholders. The session also included actions by new groups of actors that have been able to influence the policy agenda and spearhead change, such as youth and cities.

37. Mr. Marmo highlighted the European Green Deal, adopted in December 2019, as the EU's new growth strategy. Its goals are a resource-efficient and competitive economy, no emissions of greenhouse gas by 2050, and economic growth being decoupled from resource use.

38. A key element in reaching these goals is the new Circular Economy Action Plan, adopted by the European Commission on 11 March that will support the implementation of SDGs 12 and 8, among others. The objective is to move away from the current linear model of production and consumption. The plan includes initiatives along the entire life cycle of products and comprises four major areas for action:

- legislation from the European Union on sustainable product policy;
- empowerment of consumers by providing them with reliable information on e.g. durability and reparability of products;
- interventions on priority sectors to improve circular economy (e.g. electronics, information and communications technology, plastics, textiles, and construction);
- actions related to waste avoidance to transform waste into high-quality secondary raw materials to reduce the use of primary resources.

39. The overall aim is also to promote the transition to a circular economy at a global scale. For this, the European Commission proposed to launch a Global Circular Economy Alliance that could involve, inter alia, international actors. The European Commission is considering starting discussions on an international agreement on the management of natural resources and taking the lead on an international agreement on plastics.

40. Ms. Outi Honkatukia presented highlights from the Government of Finland's commitment to become carbon neutral by 2035 and carbon negative soon after that. This will require accelerating emission reductions and also strengthening carbon sinks.

41. Finland's Government developed a roadmap to carbon neutrality to reduce emissions from currently 56 million tons to a range of 15-23 million tons by 2035. The implementing measures include:

- an emission trading scheme at European Union level;
- an ambitious "energy tax" reform led by different industrial sectors and coordinated by the Ministry of Economy;
- a roadmap for fossil-free transport, also involving assessing taxes and charges in the transport sector; and the
- enhancement of carbon sinks.

42. Finland would welcome more ambitious policies toward climate action at European level, at the level of the G20 and globally. Finland intends to ensure that those who seem to be losing from the transition in the short term are not being left behind, as all sectors of the population need to be included to build a carbon-neutral society.

43. As reflected in a written statement⁵, Sweden aims at becoming carbon neutral and fossil-free by 2045. To this end, the Government of Sweden launched the Fossil Free Sweden initiative in 2015. The initiative brings together many different actors such as enterprises, municipalities, and associations to identify common challenges in the transformation towards lower greenhouse emissions as a step towards achieving carbon neutrality.

44. Ms. Skadborg presented the Youth Climate Council in Denmark and its role in the country. The Council is composed of thirteen young people elected by representatives of seventy-five youth organizations in Denmark. Each of its members has specific knowledge and skills, for instance on climate change, climate taxation and others.

45. Representatives of the Danish Youth Council were part of the Danish delegation to the 24th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2018. As a follow-up, the Prime Minister of Denmark agreed to establish a climate council as a channel for young people to provide inputs to the government. The Youth Climate Council is able to meet the Minister in charge of climate policy twice a year and provide advice on climate change policies.

46. The advice from the Council results from consultations with representatives of seventy-five youth organizations, which are translated into policy recommendations. The members of the Council feel empowered because their advice is taken seriously and is accepted for its substantive value rather than for procedural reasons.

47. Ms. Deda presented the "Trees in Cities Challenge", an initiative to promote the role of cities in climate change mitigation through urban forestry. Ms. Deda summarized how planting trees has important benefits for cities, as for instance, they absorb CO₂ and are a natural way of air-cooling in summer. They also contribute to biodiversity and to stronger communities, as more urban green areas can have a positive impact on social cohesion and help form stronger communities.

48. The "Trees in Cities Challenge" initiative was launched by the ECE Executive Secretary at the Secretary General's 2019 Climate Action Summit. With the recent pledge of Turkmenistan, the initiative has so far reached 10 million trees. As the initiative was joined also by cities outside the region, ECE is now reaching out to other Regional Commissions so they could also become partners to the initiative.

49. Ms. Deda also reminded the meeting that on 6 October 2020, ECE will organize the Forum of Mayors, a platform to hear from cities on progress and challenges in achieving sustainable development.

⁵ Available at: www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/sustainable-development/RFSD_2020/Statement_from_Sweden_UNECE_2020.pdf

50. Participants engaged with the speakers through questions submitted remotely. They asked for scientific evidence that greenhouse gas emissions and the resources used could be decoupled from economic growth. Mr. Marmo indicated that analysis by the International Resource Panel in its “Global Resources Outlook 2019”⁶ on the use of natural resources and their impacts provides scientific evidence supporting decoupling. Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provide additional evidence. Participants also expressed interest in the success factors of the “Trees in Cities Challenge” and in replicating the achievements through similar initiatives.

Session 4: Economic transformation, finance and technology for Sustainable Development Goals acceleration

51. Session 4 focused on structural economic transformation, financing and innovative technologies for SDG acceleration. The objective of the session was to discuss the role of finance and technology in creating greener products and services as well as investments on sustainability. This session was co-organized by UNEP and ITU with the purpose of encouraging new commitments to align economic policies and financial systems with the SDGs and the 1.5-degree global targets. The starting point of the session was the widespread understanding of the need for a rapid, integrated and just green transition to respond to planetary, social and economic challenges. In this regard, the role of women in finding new solutions and the differentiated gender impacts of the expected changes was recognized at the outset of the session.⁷

52. Introducing the topics of the session, Mr. Pozzi started by noting that the outbreak of the COVID-19 highlighted the urgency of structural transition towards resilience and sustainability. He pointed out that preliminary findings of studies looking into the role of human activity in triggering pandemics indicate that degraded habitats are likely to carry more viruses, which can infect humans. The resulting transmission of disease from wildlife to humans is “a hidden cost of human economic development”.

53. Mr. Pozzi then stressed the need to value nature and ecosystems. This means redirecting financial flows towards sustainability, including through nature-based solutions, which can restore biodiversity, boost livelihoods and health and create climate resilience. There is a need to invest in a new type of growth, which is based on circularity and on carbon neutrality. Digital technologies also play a role in creating new ways of operating and participating in the economy for producers and users. One of the lessons to be learnt through the COVID-19 crisis is that the way business is done can be changed so that mistakes of the past will not be repeated after this crisis.

54. Ms. Haahr emphasized that the financial services sector is a key sector that could help drive the sustainability transformation, in particular in combination with the use of digital technologies. The financial sector continues to be misaligned with the goals of the Paris Agreement and the preservation of biodiversity. Currently, only less than two per cent of the trillion dollars bond market is invested into nature assets. Financing could serve as a tool to internalize the cost of externalities, including of carbon emissions. There are several encouraging examples of banks using technology in innovative ways, including in the Netherlands where some banks spearheaded the funding of energy efficient buildings. In these cases, digital tools are used to assess the energy efficiency of buildings and capital costs depend on their energy performance, thus creating incentives for sustainable real estate investments. There are also small pilots of loans to farmers, in which the cost of capital will vary according to the farmers’ impact on biodiversity.

55. Another approach to accelerate SDGs is the financial sector’s use of digital technologies to make green financial products more efficient. Such products will typically

⁶ Available at: www.resourcepanel.org/reports/global-resources-outlook.

⁷ A written statement reflecting key messages on gender equality and economic transformation, finance, technology and green and inclusive change by the Civil Society Advisory Group for the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia is available at: www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/sustainable-development/RFSD_2020/UN_Women_RFSD2020.pdf.

entail higher data and administrative requirements, for example with regard to measurement frameworks for green bonds. The deployment of technology can help meet such requirements and facilitate data collection. There are examples from Africa, for instance, where blockchain chips were incorporated in solar cells to successfully harvest data for investors. Such use of technology could help boost investor confidence and support the roll-out of renewable energy projects in developing markets.

56. In addition, a promising strategy is to integrate new technical functionalities in green financial products. One example is a mobile wallet with an integrated functionality that tracks the real time carbon footprint of the consumer and offers incentives to reduce the carbon footprint. In China and elsewhere in Asia this kind of service is applied by hundreds of millions of users. Similar mobile wallets could also be rolled out in other regions. Ms. Haahr mentioned also loans for micro and small businesses that could integrate an evaluation of the ecological performance of the business in the credit scoring.

57. The presentation of Mr. Stone focused on lifestyle choices, government policies and the need to shift financial flows. The top five risks identified in the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2020⁸ were all related to the environment, and often linked to natural resource extraction and climate change. This is due to the dominant economic model which remains a 'take-make-dispose' economy based on fuelling consumer demand, lowering prices, increasing throughput, and ever-increasing environmental footprints. Over 100 billion tons of natural resources are being extracted every year, of which less than 10 per cent is recycled back into the economy. More than half of the materials that are turned into products end up either as waste, emitted or dispersed into the environment after their use.

58. Several programmes of the United Nations and its partners are addressing this challenge. UNEP is focusing particularly on SDG 12 dealing with sustainable production and consumption, and one of the key implementation mechanisms for this goal is the 'One planet network'. A substantial driver on the demand side is public procurement. Trillions of dollars a year are spent by governments on routine purchases that could help boost markets for greener products and more sustainable consumption. Another part of the equation are individual lifestyle choices. There are many encouraging initiatives, for example the 'I Live Simply Movement'. To influence the demand side drivers and to align finance with sustainability, UNEP is also partnering with over 150 banks on the Principles for Responsible Banking. UNEP's partners now represent over \$42 trillion in assets that will be aligned with the 2030 Agenda. This initiative has tremendous potential in aligning financial portfolios and assets with SDGs through an approach based on peer benchmarking in the financial services industry.

59. Ms. Bogdan-Martin presented the technology connectivity side of SDG acceleration. She started by pointing out that half of our planet is now online, but about 3.6 billion people are still cut off from connectivity. Internet access has enormous transformative potential through the power of information. The UN Secretary-General reinforced the importance of digital technologies through his High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. This and other initiatives will focus on developing meaningful connectivity for unconnected communities, thus empowering people and eventually improving their lives.

60. ITU, through its European and CIS offices, is contributing to SDG acceleration on several fronts. A regional transformational group, five regional initiatives and several projects with various UN partners have been set up to leverage the power of ICTs in education, health and women's empowerment as well as other key issues of the 2030 agenda. Ms. Bogdan-Martin noted also that the COVID-19 outbreak is a wake-up call on the vital importance of getting the world connected and on using the power of technology to improve disaster preparedness, mitigation strategies and community outreach.

⁸ Available at: www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2020.

Annex II

Summary of additional sessions held as webinars⁹

Webinar 1: SDG Challenges (18 March 2020, 13:30-15:30)

1. The SDG Lab at UN Geneva organized a webinar with five UNECE member States to share SDG implementation challenges. The five member States – Austria, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Romania and Slovenia – used the webinar to zero in on a key issue faced by their governments in delivering on the 2030 Agenda.
2. A group of experts from the International Geneva ecosystem and elsewhere, curated by the SDG Lab, joined the webinar to provide ideas, resources and connections to the countries. The five countries also used the session to stimulate an exchange of solutions among themselves, and to benefit from each other’s ideas and lessons learned in the region. More than 100 participants took part in the webinar that consisted of five SDG challenge presentations.
3. Austria received inputs on the theme of using digitization to help achieve the SDGs. The expert discussant was Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head, ITU Office for Europe. Mr. Ponder kick-started the discussion by remarking that information and communication technology (ICT) is often perceived as a solution and not necessarily as a challenge. He noted that ICT can provide opportunities in many sectors, such as health and agriculture, but it can also be a source of risk in terms of data privacy and protection and cybersecurity. He encouraged Austria and other countries to better assess how digitization could be used for the public good rather than just to connect citizens.
4. Bulgaria presented its challenge on tackling demographic change and the SDGs. The expert discussant was Ms. Alanna Armitage, Regional Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Ms. Armitage acknowledged that the issue of demographic decline is one that many countries are grappling with. She shared that Bulgaria has a comprehensive strategy to address a declining population, and that the country is prioritizing investments in human capital; an important counter-measure. She said governments need to adopt a ‘whole-of-government’ approach when it comes to tackling demographic challenges. This includes specific measures for the education and health sector, as well initiatives that promote active ageing and lifelong learning.
5. North Macedonia unpacked its challenge of better linking its national budget to the SDGs and increasing accountability of donor aid. The expert discussant was Ms. Scherie Nicol, Policy Analyst, Public Governance Directorate, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Ms. Nicol invited North Macedonia to consider how new technologies, like Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, can be used to optimize the way in which resources and budgets are tracked and reported. Similarly, she noted that a crucial element is ensuring that both donor-recipient governments and funding agencies have SDG-aligned budgets.
6. Romania identified policy coherence for sustainable development as one of its main challenges. The expert discussant was Ms. Anna Piccinni, Policy Analyst, Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, OECD. Ms. Piccinni remarked that the 2030 Agenda offers countries a comprehensive framework that is holistic and promotes a ‘whole-of-government’ approach. She underscored that the SDG framework must be integrated across all ministries and treated as central to planning, budgeting and implementation. She commended Romania for creating Sustainable Development Hubs (“SD Hubs”) at the level of line ministries and agencies, which serve as liaisons between different departments and other mechanisms responsible for implementing the country’s sustainable development strategy.

⁹ In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual format of the Regional Forum, two sessions that had originally been part of the formal programme of the Regional Forum were held as webinars. These sessions are covered in Annex II.

7. The last country to present its SDG-related challenge was Slovenia, which used the webinar to solicit ideas on balancing disaggregated equality data with data privacy and protection. The expert discussant was Mr. Jovan Kurbalija, Founding Director, Diplo Foundation. Mr. Kurbalija highlighted the importance of consulting stakeholders like standards bodies and equality infrastructure institutions (e.g. conformity assessment bodies) to ensure that privacy regulations are adhered to. He noted that attempts to collect disaggregated data could amplify stereotypes and further promote exclusions in society but there are measures that can be put in place to mitigate this. He equally stressed the necessity for countries to develop a good taxonomy of data and a common understanding of what the definition of privacy means in practice.

8. The SDG Challenges concept was a pilot initiative for the SDG Lab. It was tested in the context of the regular requests the SDG Lab receives from UN Member States to provide a forum not only for the exchange of good SDG practices but also a space to openly discuss the many issues they face in delivering on the 2030 Agenda. The SDG Challenges webinar was jointly organized by the SDG Lab and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), in partnership with the UNECE secretariat.

Webinar 2: Leveraging data and statistics for SDG progress (20 March 2020, 10:00-12:00)¹⁰

9. Under the aegis of the 2020 virtual Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, the ECE Statistical Division organized a webinar on “*Leveraging data and statistics for SDG progress*” to bring together some of the main stakeholders of evidence-based policy making for SDG progress – data producers and data users for policy action.

10. The webinar was structured in two sub-sessions, following the statistics for SDGs production and use perspectives: “How the data are pooled together on National Reporting Platforms” – to present the initiatives, challenges and solutions of National Statistical Offices in the production and dissemination of Statistics for SDGs and “How the data are used for policy-making for sustainable development” – to showcase how the data is used to develop policy action, targeting the national, sub-national levels or “left behind” groups and dimensions. The representatives of Belarus, Georgia, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Russian Federation and the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, moderated by Ms. Lieneke Hoeksma, Statistics Netherlands, met virtually to showcase the progress and challenges.

11. The first sub-session focused on the processes and partnerships set behind the production and dissemination of statistics for SDGs, the role of national statistical offices and national coordination mechanisms.

12. Ms. Elena Kukharevich presented national coordination mechanisms in Belarus and the inter-agency working groups cooperating in the SDG progress management architecture. The coordination and leading role of Belstat allowed the creation and development of the national system for SDG monitoring and evaluation, applying to both the global indicators and the national indicators for Agenda 2030 monitoring.

13. Ms. Monika Gorzelak presented Statistics Poland’s approach to compile and provide statistics on the National Reporting Platform. Open source solutions and customization for national priorities offers the possibility to disseminate global and national indicator sets for SDGs in a user-friendly and visual manner. An innovative feature of the platform is the section referring to business indicators – a set of 30 indicators monitoring six SDGs that are relevant to business. Statistics Poland offers guidance and support in calculating a company’s individual impact and contribution to SDG progress.

14. A federal-wide coordination scheme for SDG statistics production and dissemination of Russian Federation governmental agencies was presented by Ms. Natalia Ignatova. Production and dissemination of SDG indicators – by Rosstat and other federal authorities – as well as their submission to international organizations is regulated by the Federal Plan of

¹⁰ Additional information on the webinar “*Leveraging data and statistics for SDG progress*” is available at: <https://statswiki.unecce.org/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=278036895>.

Statistical Works, authorizing Rosstat to coordinate the activities of the federal authorities on the collection and submission of official statistical information on SDG indicators to the international organizations. The unified interdepartmental statistical information system was designed to disseminate SDG indicators produced by Rosstat and other agencies.

15. The National Institute of Statistics of Spain showcased the national coordination mechanism and procedure to disseminate the SDG indicators on the National Reporting Platform, adopting open source solutions and international standards for data transmission (SDMX). The three levels of coordination – national, sub-national/regional and global – presented by Ms. Ana Carmen Saura - allow the statistical office of Spain to promote and implement the international standards and recommendations for producing statistics for SDGs.

16. The Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland took best advantage of the already existing MONET indicator system for monitoring sustainable development in the country since 2003 and adapted it to the conditions and requirements of Agenda 2030. Ms. Anne Boesch described the nationalization and adaptation process of SDG targets to the Swiss context and the progress made thanks to close cooperation of different stakeholders and the active involvement of the Federal Statistical Office at all stages of indicator nationalization.

17. The second sub-session on “How the data are used for policy action for sustainable development” outlined how data can point to who is “left behind” to target them through policy initiatives. Two institutions from Georgia presented their best practices on how data and statistics led to policy action. In the first example, Ms. Lela Sturua from the National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health focused on lead contamination as an obstacle to achieve numerous SDGs. As a result of dedicated survey and data compilation from different sources, a set of immediate and long-term strategic response actions were initiated to address the lead contamination problem. Interagency cooperation and coordination became essential to address the issue in a comprehensive and complex manner and to ensure a targeted response in the future.

18. Integration of the human rights dimension in policy action allows to apply the “leaving no one behind” principle, as showcased in the examples presented by Ms. Alison Hosie, representing the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI). Although the human rights indicators are not directly mentioned in the SDG indicators, they are an indispensable dimension of Agenda 2030 progress. ENNHRI in Belgium formulated policy recommendations for people living in poverty based on qualitative data collected from a variety of stakeholders. ENNHRI in UK and Denmark embarked on partnerships with national statistical offices to support the SDG monitoring process and data collection. The Scottish Human Rights Commission developed a monitoring framework for the Scottish National Action Plan on Human Rights making an explicit connection to SDGs progress.

19. The second example from Georgia presented by Ms. Ekaterine Skhiladze showed how data can lead to changes in laws. Based on the findings and data collection exercise initiated by the Public Defender Office in Georgia, sexual harassment became a part of Georgian anti-discrimination legislation in 2019, after the bill on sexual harassment did not pass in 2014 due to insufficient evidence and statistics. Yet, the challenge is to continue to collect the data and the future steps are to harmonize the data collection methodology and disaggregation all over the country.

20. Ms. Monika Gorzelak presented the innovative partnership of Statistics Poland with business representatives and academia, which resulted in the development of an Impact Barometer – a tool comprising a set of 30 indicators for businesses – referring to SDGs 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, and 12. It allows to measure the impact of individual enterprises on the SDGs and make a collective analysis of individual enterprise impacts as an indication of progress towards the SDGs.

21. The webinar/round table concept was built around the idea that data and statistics are important elements to progress with the implementation and monitoring of Agenda 2030. The Conference of European Statisticians Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs and the UN Regional Coordination Group for Data and Statistics provided case studies and support in the organisation of the webinar.