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Statement

by

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[9 min]

Mr. Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Council of Europe,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

I would like to start by expressing my gratitude for this invitation to join you today. As you all know, implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the common priority of all UN Member States. We at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) believe that this implementation begins at the local level - nothing can be achieved if citizens, communities and cities do not take action. It is therefore my pleasure to be here today to talk about the outcomes of the UN SDG Summit that took place in September, and to make the link between these global discussions and our joint work at the local level.

We are living through turbulent times. Continued shocks confront us with new challenges for achieving the 2030 Agenda and derail the progress accomplished so far. The latest assessment carried out by UNECE shows that we are on track to achieve less than one out of five of the measurable targets in the 2030 Agenda. The political declaration of the SDG Summit states it plainly: the achievement of the SDGs is in peril.

However, this is not a time to despair. It's a time to strengthen our efforts to eradicate poverty; improve health, education and social protection systems; combat climate change; reduce environmental pressures; put an end to gender discrimination and advance many other goals that require urgent attention.

Indeed, the need for acceleration, and a renewed commitment to deliver, were the core outcomes of the SDG Summit.

The political declaration recognized the universal character of the 2030 Agenda and that its Goals are indivisible and interlinked, balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) in an integrated manner.

These considerations, while not new, remain critical. They remind us of two things: One, that sustainable development is a concern for all countries, and two, that exploiting synergies between various goals is critical for acceleration. Drawing attention to the co-benefits of our actions on climate change, biodiversity etc. is important to overcome resistance to the necessary transformations and to develop partnerships between different actors.

Policy coherence and integrated approaches are essential for achieving progress. For this, we need to bring together the efforts of all sectors of society and all levels of government. Local and regional actions can tackle basic sustainability issues such as waste management, mobility, air pollution, and many others. Decisions taken at these levels are therefore of great significance.

Member States explicitly recognized this role in the political declaration coming out of the SDG Summit. Let me share with you some of the relevant parts of the declaration:

- i. Member States committed to further localize and advance integrated planning and implementation at the local level.
- ii. Partnerships at all levels, including local, are called on to engage civil society, private sector, academia and youth.
- iii. The potential of local zero-waste initiatives is explicitly mentioned.
- iv. The declaration includes a commitment to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, including through the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Appropriate technical and financial assistance will be required for this.

- v. The promotion of a disaster-risk informed approach to sustainable development at all levels, including local and regional, is mentioned – this is key given the increasingly drastic impacts of extreme weather events. The integration of risk reduction into policies, programmes and investment at all levels should be accelerated. As local and regional authorities run critical services and infrastructures, their role will be essential in this regard.

At UNECE, believe that, despite all tensions, multilateralism can make a critical contribution to build a more sustainable, prosperous world where no one is left behind. And local and regional authorities are called to play a role in this new networked multilateralism that includes multiple actors.

I am proud to say that UNECE has been at the forefront of efforts in engaging with the local level. Allow me to highlight a few areas where our efforts have been particularly fruitful.

In the field of urban transport, UNECE works with WHO Europe to implement the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme, which we call THE PEP. Recent products of interest include a Handbook on Sustainable Urban Mobility and Spatial Planning. This helps States – but also local and regional authorities – in integrating transport, health, quality of life and environmental objectives into urban and spatial planning policies, with 150 case studies from cities across the region.

THE PEP also promotes a Pan-European Master Plan for Cycling Promotion, and is looking at gender mainstreaming in urban transport and mobility policies and practice. Male thinking and perspectives dominate society and are so ingrained that policies and infrastructure are considered as gender neutral even though they cater to men. We are aiming to change that.

We also work with cities to make urban transport safer: Road traffic deaths continue to be a major global concern, causing 1.3 million deaths and 50 million permanent injuries each year. Urban areas, with their high population densities and complex transportation systems, face particular challenges in ensuring road safety. Local governments need sufficient technical and financial capacity. This can be a challenge, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, and is further exacerbated by lack of data on road safety, poor enforcement, limited resource allocation from the national to the local level, lack of relevant city policies and action plans, as well as lack of integration of urban and transport planning. UNECE hosts the UN Road Safety Fund, which has established the Alliance of Cities for Road Safety. It is a one-stop shop for cities to engage in capacity building, receive technical advice, implement catalytic action and benefit from city-to-city exchange.

Beyond these, we engage in numerous other areas as well, including on environment, nature-based solutions such as urban tree planting, sustainable construction, etc.

But aside from this technical work, the strength of UNECE also lies in its convening power, and its ability to bring actors from across the region together for multilateral discussion. We use this power to engage with the local level as well.

An excellent example is our Forum of Mayors. You heard the Chair of the Forum of Mayors, the Honorable Mayor of Skopje, and his briefing on the discussions.

In addition to the Forum of Mayors, we also provide other fora where your involvement would be most welcome: For example, next March, UNECE will convene in Geneva the annual Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region, which we organize in close collaboration with other UN regional entities. This is a

multistakeholder platform, where in addition to member States, civil society, academy, the private sector and representatives from many international organizations also take part.

We will take stock of the progress achieved so far and discuss how to operationalize the outcomes of the SDG Summit and deliver on the commitment to accelerate SDG implementation. There will be an emphasis on the six transition areas I mentioned earlier. It would be my pleasure to hear about the fruitful initiatives you are leading in these fields, and I warmly invite you to join this event.

I hope I have been able to convey the importance attached to the role of local and regional authorities in SDG implementation. Let me conclude by reiterating that UNECE stands ready to work with all of you in order to create a brighter future that leaves no one behind.

Thank you.