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Talking points

by

Ms. Olga Algayerova

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at the

Forum of Mayors

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- Excellencies, Mayors, Ambassadors,

I am extremely proud to welcome you to the very first Forum of Mayors – the first of its kind not only for my organization, UNECE, but for the entire United Nations.

Today we are truly making history – during a time of uncertainty. Over the past months, we have witnessed the outbreak of an unprecedented pandemic which found all of us unprepared. In dense urban areas, the COVID-19 crisis was felt particularly strong and hit the most vulnerable groups of society hardest. Cities have become the epicentres of the pandemic with an estimated 90 percent of all reported COVID-19 cases.

- As the virus is spreading across the UNECE region, local governments are on the frontlines of addressing this pandemic. The current crisis teaches us once more that some of the most pressing challenges humanity faces 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 – cities will become even more engaged in the frontlines of addressing these key challenges.
- For me, there is no doubt that the multilateral system needs to adapt to these new realities. Cities are no longer simply places where we live and work but crucial actors in the international arena. As we are marking the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, it is crucial to show that we are working towards a more effective multilateralism – and including local actors is a must.
- At UNECE, we are ready to play our role in ensuring that the voices of local authorities are being heard on the international stage. That is why we are convening today the first Forum of Mayors which brings together over 40 city leaders from Europe, North America, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Under the theme “City Action for a resilient future”, we will hear the experiences of mayors in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and other emergencies, and will get to know innovative practices to “build back better”. 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. While COVID-19 continues to be catastrophic, it also offers a chance to transform our cities and create a new normal: a normal that benefits all people and our planet.

- One year ago, when we were starting to prepare for the 2020 Forum of Mayors, we imagined it to be entirely differently. We hoped for city leaders from all corners of our region to travel to Geneva and discuss concrete measures for climate action in cities. Today, we find ourselves in a half-empty room, in the midst of a global pandemic. Is this the right moment to hold such a Forum? Yes. We are creating something more powerful than we could have ever imagined: we are establishing a Forum for those that are currently at the forefront of the battle. A Forum to uncover the innovative practices that are currently being generated, tested and are ready to be shared. The timing for our Forum could indeed not be better: we are learning from the experiences of cities just as they are in the process of re-inventing themselves.
- It is often said that cities are the places where future happens. Cities have always been a real-live testing ground for human innovation. Now we are presented with a live-time opportunity where we can shape our future more than ever before. The Forum of Mayor will provide a workshop for more inspiration, more food for thought and more ambition for rethinking our urban realities.
- In these times, we are constantly reminded that we are not yet immune to the virus. Let us also not forget that our planet is not immune to the destructive impact of climate change. I want to be very clear on this matter: climate change remains one of the defining emergencies of our time and it is happening even more quickly than we feared.
- Our Forum today will give space to discuss actions mitigating the effects of climate change and natural hazards. How did the city of Tirana manage the recovery after a disastrous earthquake? How are cities like Helsingborg combating climate change via nature-based solutions, including urban tree-planting? All these insights by mayors will feed into the decision-making process of the UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management, our intergovernmental body that will

provide policy guidance to member States and will continue its session in this room tomorrow and on Thursday.

- 2020 will be remembered by future generations. In the current hurly-burly, it might be easy to forget that this year is also marking the beginning of the UN's Decade of Action. With only ten years left to reach the Sustainable Development Goals, it is important to recognize the key role of cities as drivers for a sustainable transformation. 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.
- Distinguished mayors, let me be clear: reaching the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 relies heavily on your local action and ambition. I can assure you: you are not alone – this is a collective effort. UNECE stands ready to assist you. We have the policy instruments, tools, norms and standards that can support your sustainability efforts. There is one concrete action that you can already take today: join our Trees in Cities Challenge and contribute to the greening of our urban spaces. We are here to help you deliver the future you want. We want to support you to recover better and help you build more resilient, inclusive and sustainable cities.
- Let us use our joint potential to meet the needs of an ever-changing and increasingly complex world. While we are here today at the Palais des Nations to build a better future of cities – we are already building something else: a better, more inclusive multilateralism. Today we are not only making history, we are also leaving history behind. Welcome to the future, welcome to the United Nations first Forum of Mayors.