

Report to Zonta International Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region Geneva, 19 March 2020 (virtual meeting)

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Global context

There are only 10 years to go until the year 2030 and although the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has triggered progress in many areas, the speed and scale of implementation is not enough to achieve the required sustainability transformation. Last year, in September 2019 at the UN Summit on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), World Leaders marked the year 2020 as the beginning of the “Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development” 2020-2030. Ambitious action is therefore needed to accelerate progress and to bring about deep transformative change.

Virtual meeting

The UNECE Regional Forum invited key stakeholders from governments, civil society, academia and the private sector to be informed on recent developments. Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Regional Forum 2020 was held as a virtual meeting. It was the first time ever that a UNECE Forum took place in this exceptional format and the UNECE Geneva team managed to organize the Forum in an innovative way. The online exchange was a promising start, but unfortunately, all presentations were very much shortened and little time was left for discussion. More than 300 participants connected virtually. Prior to the Forum, a virtual civil society meeting was held on 18 March.

High-level speakers

H.E. Ambassador Mr. Vaqif Sadiqov, Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan to the UN in Geneva, chaired the Forum and high-level speakers were Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General and Ms. Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary and Under-Secretary-General. They both stressed the importance of the process of follow up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Policies on climate change should be more ambitious and game-changing solutions must be found. The SDGs should be brought to schools, classes and households. Young people must be better equipped to prepare for the future.

Four major themes

The Regional Forum addressed SDGs actions around **four main subjects**:

1. Accelerating action and delivery for sustainable development in the UNECE region
2. Accelerating SDG progress through Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)
3. Actions for green and inclusive change
4. Economic transformation, finance and technology for SDG acceleration.

Gender issues were not addressed as a specific item but were mentioned under each of the four subjects. UNECE contributes to the achievement of SDG goal 5 on gender equality by mainstreaming gender equality in all its activities.

*In **session 1**, on **accelerating action and delivery for sustainable development**, Prof. Katherine Richardson, member of the Independent Group of Scientists that drafted the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) and Leader of the Sustainability Science Center at the University of Copenhagen, introduced the key messages from the GSDR and their implications for the UNECE region. She highlighted the interactions between all SDGs: they are interlinked, so in order to obtain results, action is required concerning all goals. The Regional SDG Progress Report was presented by Ms. Lidia Bratanova, Director of the UNECE Statistical Division. A lot still needs to be done to improve statistics in the UNECE Region, but good progress was made, including on goal 5 (e.g. data on women in decision making). Better statistics are essential to monitor progress and there still is a lack of statistics which are divided by gender.

Session 1 included speakers from three groups of stakeholders: civil society, youth and the business sector. In line with Ms. Lidia Bratanova, Ms. Ena Peeva (civil society) stressed the need of gender-segregated data and statistics.

***Session 2: the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)** aim to speed up the implementation of the SDGs by the exchange of experiences and the launch of partnerships, based on an evidence-based review process. The good news is that 54 out of the 56 UNECE countries have undertaken a VNR by 2020. The aim is to compile a set of recommendations that can be shared at the global level on how to improve VNRs in the next HLPF cycle, to ensure that they contribute more effectively to accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Speakers from Romania (Mr. László Borbély, State Counsellor to the Prime Minister) and Switzerland (Mr. Jacques Ducrest, Delegate of the Federal Council for 2030 Agenda) agreed on the importance of the VNRs and the process of involving governmental departments, as well as on the need of monitoring based on reliable statistics and data, including gender data.

*Speakers in **Session 3** highlighted actions by governments and other stakeholders to accelerate SDG progress regarding **actions for green and inclusive change**, such as sustainable food, carbon neutrality and sustainable natural resources management. The new EU Circular Economy Action Plan was presented by Mr. Luca Marmo (Environment Directorate-General, European Commission). The plan's major goal is the transition to a circular economy, through a better circularity in a few critical sectors and the empowerment of the EU customers. Other speakers were Ms. Outi Honkatukia (Chief Negotiator for Climate Change, Finland) who explained the Finish commitment to achieve carbon neutrality by 2035, Ms. Monika Skadborg (President, Danish Youth Council) on youth engagement in Denmark and Ms. Paola Deda (Director of UNECE Forests, Land and Housing Division). They highlighted the need for a rapid, integrated and adequate green transition. Actions by new groups of actors have triggered additional momentum and have been able to influence the policy agenda and spearhead change, such as youth and cities.

*In **Session 4** presentations focused on how **economic transformation, finance and technology** can contribute to SDG acceleration and ensure that potential negative impacts on employment and inequality are addressed. Mr. Bruno Pozzi (Director, Europe Office, UN Environment Programme) referred to the hidden cost of human economic development and explained the impact of human activity on the growth and spread of viruses.

The session was co-organized by UN Environment and ITU, with contributions from Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin (Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau International Telecommunication Union, ITU), Ms. Marianne Haahr (Director Sustainable Digital Finance Alliance) and Mr. Steven Stone (Chief, Resources and Markets Branch, Economy Division, UN Environment). Ms. Haahr spoke about using digital technologies and processes to make green financial products more efficient, consequently integrating new green financial products and thereby unlocking more capital. She mentioned the example of Alipay in China, one of the world's largest mobile wallet producers. The company integrated functionality in the mobile wallet, inviting algorithms to analyze 18 of the client's spending behaviors. The users of the wallet receive a real-time carbon footprint and an energy point if he/she starts to reduce his/her carbon footprint. The green energy points allow the customer to obtain a (digital) tree on his/her mobile phone and as the tree grows bigger, a real tree will be planted. This process will be observed by drones, which send pictures back to the client to show the planted tree. As Alipay has 500 million users, its clients are currently the world's largest scaled group of users who are informed on their carbon footprint.

Conclusions

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary and Under-Secretary-General, said that she was happy to see that the Forum could take place under exceptional circumstances, with the use of innovative technologies.

On the content of the Forum, she highlighted the need to accelerate efforts for the Decade of Action to achieve the SDGs, also in the UNECE region with its mostly high- and middle-income countries. None of the UNECE Region countries is already taking sufficient action and therefore policy efforts need to be stepped up and accelerated. UNECE is known for its normative outputs and should be able to reach the best policy knowledge. The problems are cross border and concern all countries hence why international action is needed. UNECE should step up its efforts to improve multilateralism.

At the Forum, attention was given to accelerating action on SDGs, with some focus on the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and climate change. The transition to low-carbon, climate-resilient economies remains slow and consequently, progress in reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions is sluggish. There is a hidden cost of human economic development and new ways need to be found on how to facilitate the circular economy and the reuse of resources.

During the Forum presentations, **gender issues were not discussed as a theme as such**, but some speakers mentioned the persistent gender gaps as a challenge that requires more attention. Gender gaps in all spheres, including labor participation, persist and a significant rural-urban divide creates further inequalities. Stronger efforts are needed to break down sectoral silos and build strong alliances. Greater public and private financing are required to match intentions and increased political will is needed to raise ambitions.

UNECE encourages **gender-responsive economic policymaking**, through the exchange of good practice, research, and policy recommendations.

Follow-up of the UNECE Regional Forum

The Regional Forum feeds into national and global processes and the Chair's summary of the Regional Forum will provide the region's official input for the 2020 High-level Political Forum.

The meeting of the 2020 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (under the auspices of the ECOSOC Council) will be held from 7 - 16 July 2020, including the three-day

ministerial meeting of the Forum from 14 - 16 July 2020. The theme will be "Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development."