

UNECE 2017 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, Geneva, 25 April 2017
Opening statement by Nurgul Djanaeva, on behalf of civil society

More than 80 civil society representatives from the UNECE region met on 24 April 2017 to provide input to the first stand-alone UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. There is a enormous interest by diverse civil society in continuing the pivotal role which we play in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are very proud that we had such a wide representation of civil society, from all sectors: people with disabilities, children and youth, migrants and diaspora, workers and trade unions, farmers, small and medium enterprises, science and academia, environment and development NGOs, and women, as well as from subregions: Turkey and Western Balkans, Caucasus, Eastern Europe, EU, Northern America and Central Asia.

We were glad to hear from UNECE Executive Secretary Christian Friis Bach and from the Dutch Ambassador Jeroen Verheul that civil society organisations (CSOs) are key to achieving inclusive and sustainable development, not just as watchdogs of governments - which is a very important role - but also as partners, contributors and rights-holders.

We looked at the SDGs being reviewed in this year's cycle, and identified the gaps and challenges, for the successful translation to national and local level of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We call for action to strengthen an enabling environment and overcome systemic obstacles for meaningful engagement of civil society and to ensure obligations to rights holders in the SDGs. We denounce the rising authoritarianism, racism and xenophobia, increasing corporate power, and shrinking civil society space. Attacks to freedom of association and assembly are widespread across the region.

CSOs are central to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Their success requires being effectively engaged from the beginning of the agenda implementation, review and follow up. CSOs have provided expertise and best practices for the SDGs reviewed in 2017:

- For instance, on SDG1, we note that nearly 30% of youth in Europe are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Almost 80% of people with disabilities in the region are living in poverty. There are more than 4 million homeless people in the EU, the richest region of the world. Increasing precarisation results in informal work of up to 80% of the workforce in some UNECE countries. Multidimensional inequality was best described by a representative of the disability movement, who explained the multiple dimensions of poverty as a blind woman having been discriminated against, having suffered from gender discrimination and scarce employment prospects. Action on SDGs continues to be oblivious to the multidimensional aspects of inequality that people face. Social protection floors are among the most effective tools to fight poverty. To fund social protection schemes, UNECE governments are responsible to create adequate fiscal space to support social policies, especially to prevent and navigate crises, through redistributive tax systems.

- SDG5: UNECE member states must ensure women's participation at local, national, regional and global levels; secure proper coverage of sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality; and guarantee that women's rights are mainstreamed across all SDGs. Governmental priorities are currently going in the wrong direction. Funding for women's rights organisations has been halved in the last 5 years. Only 2% of ODA devoted to peace and conflict targets gender equality. This year, the US military budget has been proposed to increase by 54 billion US dollars. Meanwhile, the same administration is eliminating funding connected to maternal health, AIDS, education and reproductive health, totalling a comparatively meagre 640 million US dollars, endangering women's lives worldwide. We have a proposal to revert this trend. Formal provision of high quality childcare and long-term care for the elderly is virtually non-existent in many UNECE countries. Women and girls, are expected to look after the needs of dependent relatives, de facto subsidising the economy. [Trade unions' reports on the care economy](#) shows that decent work, social dialogue and living wages can reduce poverty and inequality for women at risk and improve the whole economy. Public investment that prioritises the care economy could assist countries in their efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those relating to ensuring healthy lives; achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls; management of water and sanitation; decent work; and infrastructure.
- SDG17: financing for development must be adequate and accountable to achieve the SDGs. UNECE countries, particularly aid providers, should uphold their ODA commitments and to engage in pro-poor and sustainable development cooperation. Against the background of increasing channelling of development aid to the private sector, we call for investment in public, affordable and inclusive services. Moreover, public-private partnerships and blending mechanisms should comply with development effectiveness principles and include CSOs across the project cycle. We demand that full attention be paid to capacity-building for all CSOs. We call for full, effective accountability of all development actors, with accountability frameworks in place, with full participation of CSOs.
- The global indicators' framework is a minimum necessary to measure SDG progress and must be measured in line with human rights obligations. CSOs are valuable actors in this process. CSOs can provide valuable data to measure the SDGs indicators, but also to fill the measurement gaps.

CSOs are full of energy and enthusiasm to realise sustainable and inclusive development. It is in our mutual interest that all SDGs are achieved. Only educated and healthy societies can lead the way to sustainable development. For this, public investment in public services that target the ones left behind is crucial.

We, civil society, call for effective and meaningful engagement of civil society in all its diversity in the UNECE processes at all levels. CSOs are working on institutionalising this CSO engagement mechanism and ask for the support of UNECE and its member states for this to happen. Sustained support for CSOs is crucial for us to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs.