



**PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**Statement**

**by**

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**Executive Secretary**

**of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at**

**Clean Air Forum**

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The world is waking up, coughing and wheezing, to the damage done by dirty air.

Even if air pollution is sometimes invisible, the damage it does can be quite significant.

Air pollution affects our health, contributes to the climate crisis and also hurts the wallet: health costs and lost work days due to air pollution-related illness are estimated at or above 20 per cent of GDP in 10 countries of the Pan-European region. We also know that air pollution is a major cause of environmental degradation, threatening almost two-thirds of Europe's ecosystems.

But while leadership at the city and national scales is crucial to tackle toxic air, it is not enough – we need action at all levels. Luckily, we can look to a quietly triumphant symbol of *regional* cooperation, which has helped us to significantly reduce air pollution in this region over the last 40 years.

In 1979, countries in the pan-European region decided to work together

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for cleaner air, in the framework of a legally binding international treaty: the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution. This year, we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Convention and UNECE is very proud to have accompanied this important agreement over the past 4 decades.

Allow me to share with you some of the achievements and lessons learnt from the 40-year history of the Air Convention:

Initially signed by 32 countries, the Convention had significant successes within just a few years in addressing a key environmental crisis of its day. This led to many more countries joining. The Convention now covers 51 Parties, reaching from North America through Europe to as far east as Kazakhstan. Through its unique legal framework and science-policy interface, the number of substances covered by the Convention has also been gradually extended to cover almost all the major air pollutants and emission sources – fossil fuel-fired power plants, agriculture, vehicles, industry, domestic stoves and more.

It doesn't stop there. This year, certain amendments to the Convention's Gothenburg Protocol entered into force. This broke new ground in the fight for clean air, setting national air pollutant limits for

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2020 and beyond, and introducing the first ever legally binding emission reduction commitments for fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>), which is among the principal targets of cities' efforts around the globe. The Gothenburg Protocol also became the first legally binding international treaty to target the short-lived climate pollutant black carbon i.e. soot, as well as ground-level ozone (O<sub>3</sub>) precursors. All of this supports integrated action for clean air and climate resilience.

Forty years since its inception, the achievements of the Air Convention have been remarkable, not least for human health. Thanks to the Convention, since 1990, emissions of harmful substances including particulate matter and sulphur have been cut by 30 to 80 per cent in Europe and 30 to 40 per cent in North America. In Europe, these measures account for one additional year of life expectancy, and prevent 600,000 premature deaths annually.

This is important to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, mainly SDG 3 on Good Health and Well-Being.

The achievements of the last 4 decades would never have been possible without our long-standing partners within the UN System, such as WHO, WMO and UNEP, and also the European Union. Working hand-in-hand with the European Union, e.g. through jointly developing

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methodologies for estimating, reporting and reviewing national air pollutant emissions and for monitoring of ecosystems, has made the Convention stronger and kept the integrity of the agreement.

Despite the progress, the Scientific Assessment Report under the Convention in 2016 found that background levels of pollution remain an issue in the UNECE region.

This essentially means that, even if emissions are reduced at the local and national level, the background pollution influenced by transboundary sources is still higher than what WHO recommends.

This is why international cooperation on the transboundary part of air pollution, including beyond the UNECE region, is key.

Other regions, especially Asia, which today suffers from significant air pollution, are looking to the Air Convention as a model to inspire efforts.

In response to the need for stronger cooperation with countries from outside the UNECE region, the Convention will launch a Forum for Cooperation at its 40th Anniversary Special High-Level Session, which will take place in two weeks.

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This will be an opportunity to further strengthen the national-regional-global linkages to tackle air pollution.

I invite you all to join us for this important event and to work with us on the Forum.

The 40 years of experience of the Convention have shown that the air pollution problem cannot be solved at the local or national level alone. It needs to be tackled at all levels and across all sectors. This will require the active engagement of all sectors, and also behavioural change by each and every one of us.

Citizens all around the world are calling public authorities to action. They want their human right to breathe clean air to be enforced, for them and their children. The experience of the last 40 years under the Air Convention shows that we can achieve cleaner air, provided we work together.

Looking into the future, I hope that 40 years from now, all countries in the UNECE region will have ratified the Convention and its protocols. I also hope that we can work towards a new amendment to the Gothenburg Protocol, one which takes an even broader integrated

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approach to environmental policymaking than what we have now.

I hope that the UNECE Air Convention will have inspired other regions to set up their own regional Conventions. I hope that these Conventions work together in a network and through a coordination mechanism to align methodologies. I hope that they learn from each other and exchange experiences. I hope that the European Union will continue to be a strong partner for us, to help facilitate knowledge transfer and a mutual learning process.

UNECE remains committed to supporting your efforts in fighting air pollution.

Let's live up to our collective responsibility.

Thank you for your attention.

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