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Opening statement

by

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at

Webinar for the Parliaments of the UNECE Region

**“Putting the wellbeing of people at the centre of COVID-19 recovery strategies: The
critical role of parliaments”**

Geneva, 31 March 2022

Secretary General of IPU, Mr. Martin Chungong,

Excellencies,

Members of Parliament,

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you today to this regional webinar that will address how COVID-19 recovery strategies can help accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and thus contribute to more resilient, inclusive and prosperous societies in our region.

In 2022, we are close to the mid-point of the time foreseen for enacting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and we are lagging behind in meeting many of the goals enshrined in it.

From the global perspective, Our Common Agenda – the UN Secretary-General’s vision to reinvigorate multilateralism – is designed to accelerate the implementation of existing agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Acting in this spirit, UNECE organizes focused exchanges and peer learning at the regional level, which are necessary for national and global success with the SDGs. The key action in this is the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, which will take place for the sixth time, on 6-7 April 2022. It will highlight the importance of the regional perspective in follow-up and review of progress towards the SDGs.

In our region, in the 56 UNECE member States in North America, Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, SDG progress has been mixed.

(You will hear more details on the regional status of SDG implementation later in this webinar from Andres Vikat, who is from the UNECE Statistics Division.)

The situation in a part of the region reminds us that there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development, as enshrined in the preamble of the 2030 Agenda.

While economic recovery and the lifting of COVID restrictions in recent months are marking the first steps out of the crisis, global issues continue to threaten people, societies, and the environment. Inequalities related to social protection and health services, aggravated by persisting gender disparities, are prevalent in the Europe and Central Asia region. Climate change continues to threaten ecosystems and food security, and the pandemic keeps highlighting the differences in digital access across the region, increasing challenges for young people, and impacting people's movement and migration.

Health and well-being remain concerns: as of December 2021, more than 169 million people had been infected with COVID-19 and almost two million had lost their lives. In addition to the challenge posed to safety and the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, enormous pressure has been placed on health care systems across all countries of the region. Priority must now be given to the recovery and improvement of health care systems so as to be better prepared for future risks and challenges.

Issues of social protection and decent work threaten the achievement of the SDGs in the region. While some countries have a good social protection response, there are response gaps across the region. Economic insecurity, lasting poverty, and rising inequalities remain central among almost all countries, albeit at different levels. The post pandemic period provides an opportunity for governments to introduce new social protection measures or strengthen existing ones. It is now vital that mobilised resources lead to well-designed mechanisms that deliver more equitable and sustainable outcomes for all categories of

the population, especially the most vulnerable such as women and girls, older people, and young workers.

Measures taken in response to COVID-19 can accelerate SDG progress if we get them right, and this is where you, the members of parliaments, have a unique role.

First of all, as the direct and elected representatives of the people, you can ensure that all their voices are heard by the political decision-makers.

Second, you can propose legislation.

And third, you exercise oversight and control functions on the government and on its ability to implement COVID-related new laws and measures.

COVID-19 economic stimulus packages present an opportunity not to go back to the old ‘normal’, but to recover better. Fiscal stimuli and increased public spending associated with the COVID-19 response can make a significant contribution to advancing sustainable development, provided they include incentives, conditions and measures that incentivize green investments, promote healthy ecosystems and reduce environmental stresses.

You can also work to ensure that the needs of those hit hardest by the pandemic are addressed in the recovery programmes, preventing a further increase in inequalities.

Ultimately, recovering better means moving away from the current linear economic model towards a circular economy that contributes to the sustainable management of natural resources, and can help to shape a more resilient, prosperous and sustainable future for all.

I call on you to help in shaping this future.

I wish you interesting and fruitful discussions. Thank you.