



PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement

by

Ms. Tatiana Molcean

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Secretary
of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

at

**Plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee
High-level debate on the role of civil society in the implementation of the UN
Sustainable Development Goals**

Brussels, 14 February 2024

Mr. President,

Distinguished EESC delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the European Economic and Social Committee for the invitation to address the plenary today. At the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), we strongly believe that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be achieved unless all stakeholders are involved. We therefore support all efforts to enhance participation also by civil society actors.

To set the stage for my remarks, allow me to briefly introduce my organization, UNECE. We are one of the five Regional Commissions of the UN secretariat. Our membership comprises all of Europe as well as Central Asia, Caucasus, Israel, US and Canada. Our main goal is to support economic cooperation and integration between our member States and the implementation of the SDGs. We do this through normative and standard setting work in various areas related to sustainable development, such as transport, environment, housing and energy.

I am proud to say that this work, even if not always well known, benefits your lives every day: the safety standards for car parts - such as windshields, seat belts and infant seats - are all developed at UNECE, for example.

We are very pleased that our norms and standards are often incorporated into EU legislation. Just last year, our UN Framework Classification for Resources, which provides a holistic management system for sustainable development of energy and mineral resource endowments, was adopted by the EU Critical Raw Materials Act.

Let me now turn to the SDGs. **We are all aware that we are not on track to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.** In recent years, the world -and our region- have been hit by several shocks that have created a more difficult context to advance on the SDGs. COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and persistent economic uncertainty have darkened sustainable development prospects.

At the same time, the **cost of inaction and the exposure of our societies to multiple risks have become increasingly apparent.** In these challenging circumstances, **it is critical that we redouble our efforts and increase the effectiveness of our action to reclaim lost ground.**

Just last month, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network issued the fifth edition of the **Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24. It highlights that at the current rate, a third of the SDG targets will not be achieved by the EU by 2030, with significant differences across countries.**

In addition, our forthcoming SDG progress report, looking at the broader UNECE region, shows that only 17% of measurable targets will be met by 2030, on the basis of current trends.

The recent Europe Sustainable Development Report updates the findings of the Voluntary Review that the EU undertook last year. I wish to commend the EESC for its important contributions to the EU VR and other review and monitoring exercises. I agree fully with the main overarching messages that have emerged from related civil society consultations:

- i. Need for a comprehensive strategy on the SDGs
- ii. Need to go beyond an “SDG by SDG” approach – indeed addressing the interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs is key
- iii. Need for structured and meaningful engagement of civil society

I urge you to maintain your engagement with such review exercises in the future as a best practice – at EU level as well as country-level. This helps to bring civil society voices to the fore.

With the **Political Declaration adopted at the SDG Summit**, UN Member States made a renewed and ambitious commitment to SDG implementation. The declaration also reaffirms the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development.

Now we need to join hands, to put this political will into action.

The challenges seem daunting but we know the direction of travel.

At the SDG Summit, 6 key areas with significant catalytic and multiplier effects across the SDGs were highlighted. We have to act on them decisively to achieve transformational progress. They are:

- Food systems
- Energy
- Access and affordability
- Digital connectivity
- Education, jobs and social protection
- Climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution

In order to accelerate progress on these 6 dimensions, we need to take action that builds on synergies among SDGs. In fact, such actions have co-benefits for climate, biodiversity and other pressing challenges. This can help to overcome resistance to the necessary transformations, and to develop deeper partnerships among different actors.

“Partnerships” in this context also of course means collaboration with civil society. Let me illustrate how UNECE takes this forward.

As all Regional Commissions, UNECE annually convenes a Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for our region, where member States jointly review progress towards the SDGs.

A Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism holds a dedicated consultation in the days preceding the Forum. Outcomes are reported to the Forum plenary. Furthermore, civil society

representatives participate in the peer-learning roundtables which are dedicated to specific SDGs, providing important inputs and perspectives. The Chair's summary highlighting the outcomes of the Regional Forum, including the civil society perspectives, is submitted to the High-level Political Forum in New York to inform global deliberations on SDG implementation.

This year's Regional Forum will take place in Geneva on 13 and 14 March, with the civil society consultation on 12 March. I warmly invite you to join us.

As highlighted by civil society at last year's Regional Forum, unfortunately, civil society space is shrinking in parts of the UNECE region - including by legislation aiming to criminalize civil society organizations or by efforts to marginalize women, minorities or other vulnerable groups. And those who dare to speak up can end up harassed, prosecuted, or worse. One such group is, of course, environmental defenders. In this context, I would like to give you one more example from the work of UNECE.

We are the proud hosts of the **UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters** – for short, Aarhus Convention. The EU and its member States are all Parties to this important legal instrument, which gives the public broad and concrete rights to participate in decision-making and to have access to information and justice regarding the environment. It is considered a best practice for government engagement with civil society.

The **Convention and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers** have innovative compliance mechanisms: International committees to which any member of the public can also present cases. Civil society can also submit statements regarding the Committee's findings of non-compliance, participate in the open session meetings, and suggest candidates for the Committees.

Of the 219 cases submitted to the Convention's Committee to date, 207 have been communications from members of the public. There are a number of tangible outcomes that are making positive changes on the ground.

For example, a case was submitted by an environmental NGO called ClientEarth, alleging that the EU failed to comply with the Convention's obligations. In 2017, the Committee found the EU to be in non-compliance. Subsequently, the EU addressed the Committee's recommendations by amending regulation 1367/2006/EU, thus entitling NGOs to request internal review. Both ClientEarth and other representatives of civil society were actively involved in the Committee's follow-up procedure.

Another type of engagement is **the rapid response mechanism on environmental defenders**.

In 2021, a Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders was established by the Convention as a rapid response mechanism to protect members of the public experiencing, or threatened with, penalization, persecution or harassment for seeking to exercise their rights under the Aarhus Convention.

Anyone can submit a complaint to the Special Rapporteur.

For example, the Special Rapporteur recently received a complaint that a Switzerland-based company was, through its Guatemalan subsidiary, involved in the alleged harassment of a journalist in Guatemala that had been reporting on the subsidiary's mining activities. The journalist was supported in his complaint by a civil society organization. As a result of the Special Rapporteur's follow-up, the company dropped criminal proceedings against the journalist.

The Special Rapporteur also engages with civil society to raise awareness about his mandate and identify threats and risks experienced by environmental defenders.

As I mentioned, UNECE is proud to host this Convention. In our related work, we always encourage civil society to:

- i. share good practices and challenges and take a prominent speaking role at our treaty meetings
- ii. engage in open discussions on pressing issues with governments, private sector and other stakeholders at these meetings
- iii. comment on documents, including for decision-making

We also liaise regularly with NGO coordinators regarding the expected input of civil society prior to organization of any formal meeting to facilitate their meaningful contribution.

Indeed, the Aarhus Convention serves as a best practice -so much so that it has inspired the adoption of a similar instrument in Latin America and the Caribbean called the Escazú Agreement. UNECE is committed to ensure that the Aarhus Convention remains an effective instrument.

Let me conclude by affirming that UNECE remains committed to supporting SDG implementation in all areas of our mandate, as well as to strengthening even more our partnerships with the EU and with civil society to that end.

I will finish with gratitude: for your commitment, your energy and your passion. I know it is not always easy to perform the work that you do, and yet, every day, you continue to push for the change we desperately need. For this I can only say thank you.

I wish you a productive meeting today and very much look forward to the outcomes.
Thank you.
