

# ECE RCEM Position Paper

The Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism includes the diverse voices of our 24 constituency groups and regional representatives working across the United Nations ECE region.

1: The overall theme of HLPF2021 is “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”

In the UNECE region, COVID19 has exposed many unpleasant realities, in particular existing structural and growing inequalities in all areas of life and has impacted most the marginalized and oppressed groups as well as excluded people of all ages. It has shown us that our economies must be people centered with flexible, inclusive employment and universal social services available for all.

Building forward transformatively means strengthening and financing the social dimension of our policies to include mental health services and accessible and appropriate health care services for all. Sufficient funding and investments must be dedicated to deliver the right to social protection and health, in order to reach all those left behind because of age, gender, social status, ethnicity, disability, location, sexual orientation and any other discriminatory factors.

A transformative world will build on the lessons the pandemic has taught us. Covid is a disease of the disadvantaged and takes hold in communities of the disadvantaged. Civil society can and will play a vital part to ensure that our recovery, through Agenda 2030, is non-discriminatory, fully in line with international, regional and national human rights obligations.

For this we need governments, private sector and all other stakeholders to ensure recovery plans, policy-making processes and SDGs implementation are fully inclusive and accessible for all. Underpinning recovery will be just institutions, as well as robust, reliable and disaggregated data by gender, age groups, disability type and other

indicators as described in SDGs 16 and 17. We need quality public services which are strengthened and extended to ensure universal access to healthcare, social protection, water, sanitation, food, shelter and tenure, green transport and education.

In relation to prosperity the pandemic has increased exploitation and heightened the physical and psychological risks to the most oppressed and marginalised populations, including migrant and informal workers, front-line service workers, Indigenous Peoples, domestic and care workers - the latter who are mainly women.

Gender gaps have increased in terms of wages, opportunities, and access to and adequacy of social protection. Women of all ages have the lion's share of household tasks and home schooling, juggling multitasking of remote work and family care. Long overdue are the ratification of ILO conventions, inclusive recruitment processes and education and training to tackle systemic inequality and discrimination that increases the risks certain groups have to labour exploitation and contemporary forms of slavery, taking into account intersectional factors and harmful traditional practices.

We need

- Universal labour guarantees so all workers, regardless of their employment status, pay age, gender, disabilities or ethnicity can enjoy fundamental workers rights.
- Adequate living wages, control over working time and conditions, safety and health at work, as well as social protection.
- Collaboration with civil society to support inclusive and relevant policy making, and to amplify the voices and perspectives of oppressed and marginalised groups through existing forums, innovative campaigns and advocacy initiatives.
- Labour protections extended to all groups in formal, informal economies and high-risk sectors with strengthened and enforced national laws in line with ILO recommendations and international human rights frameworks.
- Finally we need health and social workers to be honoured, as the heroes they are, with better payment and conditions.

For our planet, the climate crisis is a result of unsustainable production & consumption systems, policies and practices. During the pandemic we could see cases of changing the law in favor of investors, sudden approval of controversial environmental projects, illegal construction of polluting plants, and illegal logging. We could see plastic pollution increasing significantly, lowering environmental standards and persecution of activists.

The roundtables failed to address our negative externalities on our environment. We are worried about the emphasis on investments and business solutions without recognition of civil society organisations as key partners in building forward. The fossil fuel and

nuclear energy economy continue to dominate, dilute and compromise progress, including within the UN.

We need

- To mitigate and reverse the impact of extractivist, colonial, neoliberal development models on ecosystems and local communities.
- Green economy tools to be included in all national and regional COVID recovery plans.
- A tougher approach to businesses, with a do-no-harm principle to ensure sustainable consumption and production is healthy, affordable and equitable for all. All countries should develop legal mechanisms to phase out severely hazardous pesticides, implement SAICM, and strengthen the fight against illegal trade in chemicals and waste. Urgent action by governments is needed to tackle plastic contamination problems throughout its life-cycle.
- A just transition with clear financing mechanisms including disability-inclusive approach to adaptation planning and programming. We urgently need to recognise our region's responsibility towards the Global South, climate migrants and Indigenous Peoples, and other frontline communities who are living with the effects of our region's unsustainable consumption and production.
- Greater emphasis on education for sustainable development, both for young people and for all segments of the population of different ages. Focus should be on understanding the relationship of economic, environmental and social problems, as well as practical skills and the ability of citizens to change behavior.
- Civil society should be in a position to speak truth to power, even if there is some hesitancy to acknowledge our input. Financial approaches should not eclipse ecological necessities and the region can and should mitigate climate changes by supporting ecological economies pioneered by grassroots communities and civil society.
- Finally, we need an intersectional approach, taking into account those most oppressed, residents of settlements located near the petrochemical and extractivist industries, waste dumps and incinerators - many of whom are women and children.

In terms of our perspectives for the future, 'Build back better' is not what we need. We want transformation and a better, more just society. Agenda 2030 should be used to accelerate this.

Instead of increasing exclusion of civil society from decision-making and movement of funds from CSOs towards government-led responses to COVID. We want inclusion, an

end to pro-governmental businesses and organizations that make many CSOs even more excluded.

Data can tell us a powerful story about priority setting. During the roundtables it was highlighted that the hardest hit sectors by Corona, occupied mostly by female and ecological workers, were not the sectors to receive the most support from the EU recovery plans, instead funding went to male dominated sectors. How did this happen? Where is the social investment?

We are concerned to see more right-wing governments with little interest in implementing SDGs, stepping back from what they have promised. We also worry about the democracy crisis in Belarus and Russia where Svetlana Tichanovskaya and Alexey Navalny were criminalised for their wish to be part of the elections.

Finally, as the world has moved towards digitalization we need to make sure that all services are accessible to all groups. An intersectional analysis for digital inclusion of all is much needed for our transformed world.

## 2. Review of the 2030 Agenda process to increase ambition and interlinkages

The HLPF is meant to ensure progress on the 2030 Agenda continues and is interlinked. However, some Member States from our region have claimed that the targets may not be reached by 2030. At the same time the UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed told our regional forum that we need ambition, urgency and scale.

In our view, for a transformative recovery, the pandemic must not be an excuse for not reaching the SDG targets, and the 2030 Agenda should guide all national and regional recovery plans.

Civil society is very committed at the country level to the 2030 Agenda and the VNRs. The principle of inclusion is at the heart of SDGs, we do have a stake in the Agenda and want our voices to be heard.

In this spirit of inclusivity, we recommend:

- From the start Member States need to put in place an inclusive process for civil society in VNR preparation. This process should provide information and

timelines about the review, inviting opinion on policy and progress through meetings and papers, having dialogues, discussions in Parliament, and publishing in an open and transparent way the results of those dialogues. In a number of countries such good practices are applied, let's learn from them!

- We were pleased to hear about Sweden's localisation of the VNR process and encourage Member States to nationalise this initiative as a tool for Building Forward Together.
- For many countries of our region civil society has developed shadow reports on SDG implementation. For example, in Russia in 2020 we engaged over 160 organizations and 200 community leaders from the whole country and provided recommendations for the government on SDG implementation. We see such reports as a great resource of expertise and practical knowledge. We would like them to be an official part of the HLPF, made publicly available on government and UN websites. These shadow reports can be found on civil society websites such as Action for Sustainable Development and Women2030.
- UN and Member States agree on the importance of good data. It is not acceptable that data provided by private companies be given more priority than official and civil society data. We, therefore, call for civil society data, indicators, analysis and recommendations to be integrated into the official VNR reports and in the national implementation process. Finland provides a clear best practice of this and we encourage all states to follow this example.
- In terms of the VNR presentations, we would like governments to demonstrate commitment and accountability for the 2030 Agenda. Governments should also share challenges and demonstrate their willingness to reflect on improvements through dialogues with civil society. We ask for more time spent on VNR reporting during the Regional Forum and HLPF and a vibrant dialogue with civil society.
- Some Member States already include civil society in their official HLPF delegations to report on SDG progress. We would like to see all governments of the region do this, including with financial support for diverse groups of civil society.
- Civil society engagement should be an ongoing process, not just a one-off engagement in preparing for a VNR presentation. We were pleased to hear

support for civil society inclusion at the Regional Forum and request that RCEM be financially supported by Member States through the UNECE secretariat.

- We recommend that RCEM is brought more centrally into the preparation of future Regional Forums. The RCEM was not involved in the planning of the Forum and its roundtables this year and, therefore, did not have the meaningful participation we would ideally like.
- We support the suggestion for an annual review of SDG 16 along with SDG 17. Building just and sustainable institutions based on an intersectional human rights approach is essential to end inequalities and build forward together in the wake of COVID-19.
- We would like to emphasize the importance of ensuring openness to civil society in the negotiation process, and that there should be no closing of doors to us through, for example, applying the 'non objection basis' approach proposed by some governments from the UNECE region. This is not the inclusive spirit of the SDGs and we call on all governments to reject such proposals.