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Summary of the work of the Economic Commission for Europe, 2019–2020

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith a summary of the work of the Economic Commission for Europe for the period 2019–2020.



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Summary

The present report contains highlights of some of the work of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in the period 2019–2020. ECE develops normative frameworks in multiple areas relevant for sustainable development. The normative outputs often address issues that have a significance beyond the region. ECE actively supports its member States in the implementation of the norms and instruments through various policy advisory and capacity-building activities. In some cases, the work also involves countries from outside the region, thus broadening the scope for knowledge-sharing and exchange of experiences. At the heart of many of the challenges posed by sustainable development in the region, there is an unresolved tension between economic prosperity and environmental pressures. Promoting the circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources can make an important contribution to overcome these challenges. Sustainable development demands integrated solutions to multifaceted problems. The adoption by ECE of new working methods to tap into the increased demand for cross-sectoral approaches is bearing fruit. Exploiting the synergies of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will be critical to accelerating progress and will remain a key strategic direction in the future work of ECE.

I. Introduction

1. Normative frameworks developed by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), including those that are being created to meet emerging needs, are powerful instruments to guide and encourage action in support of sustainable development in critical areas, such as the environment, transport, energy and forests. ECE work on the means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes the development of standards and policy guidance on trade and groundbreaking methodological work on statistics, among others.

2. The normative outputs often address issues that have significance beyond the region, as they concern such areas as air pollution, resource consumption and forest management where progress has clear global implications. In addition, formal accession from countries outside the region to some ECE instruments has recently increased. The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes has become a global legal framework for transboundary water cooperation and has attracted growing interest among non-member countries. The global projection of the work of ECE on transport has increased further after the approval of a new strategy by the Inland Transport Committee in 2019. In many cases, ECE standards and guidelines find growing acceptance beyond the region because of their usefulness, including, for example, those related to resource classification, fisheries management, agriculture standards and trade facilitation. In some of those areas, work done by ECE is helping to make different economic activities more sustainable.

3. The work of ECE, however, goes beyond the development of normative frameworks to actively support its member States in implementation through various policy advisory and capacity-building activities. In some cases, the work also involves countries from outside the region, thus broadening the scope for knowledge-sharing and exchange of experiences.

4. ECE is also taking an active role in launching and supporting initiatives with a global impact, mobilizing different constituencies. It hosts the United Nations Road Safety Fund, which in 2019 started to finance a number of projects. It launched the Trees in Cities Challenge global campaign to combat climate change and foster urban sustainability and resilience through innovative ways of integrating natural systems into urban spaces. It has also engaged other organizations in leveraging the potential of standards for gender equality and women's empowerment.

5. The overall approach of ECE to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals increasingly relies on identifying and exploiting cross-sectoral synergies for enhanced impact and the engagement of multiple actors for accelerated action. As the decade for action for the Sustainable Development Goals begins, working in those two directions while leveraging the convening power of ECE will contribute to quickening the pace of progress.

II. Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region

6. In the ECE region, there have been clear advances in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in some areas, as documented in the first regional statistical report on the situation and trends in progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the report, which was released in the run-up to the fourth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe Region, held in 2020, also shows that much remains to be done. The picture is still mixed across goals and targets, as well as across different countries and subregions. At the heart of many of the challenges posed by sustainable development

in the region, there is an unresolved tension between economic prosperity and environmental pressures.

7. Some significant successes have been achieved in reducing air pollution. In 2019, the ECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution marked 40 years of cooperation to tackle the environmental problem, which has significant health implications.

8. The achievements of the Convention in the ECE region over the past four decades have been no less than remarkable: air pollution trends and economic growth have been decoupled; emissions of harmful substances including particulate matter and sulfur have been cut by 30–80 per cent since 1990 in Europe and by 30–40 per cent in North America, which has led to healthier forest soils and lakes; and in Europe, those measures account for one additional year of life expectancy and prevent 600,000 premature deaths annually. However, much more needs to be done: only 10 countries in the ECE region have levels of air pollution with fine particulate matter below the limit recommended in the air quality guidelines of the World Health Organization.

9. While the Convention is a regional instrument, the scientific tools, models, data, monitoring methods, guidance documents and best practices developed under the Convention are available to countries and regions in other parts of the world that are also facing severe air pollution problems and can provide a basis for coordinated action between different regions. Scientific evidence shows convincingly that air pollution cannot be tackled by local or national efforts only and requires international cooperation.

10. Measures to reduce air pollution can bring climate change mitigation co-benefits. An example is the amended Gothenburg Protocol to the Convention, which entered into force on 7 October 2019. The Protocol integrates into one legally binding instrument the reduction of classical air pollutants and short-lived climate warming pollutants, such as black carbon, which is the result of the incomplete combustion of fuels. Although the lifetime of black carbon is limited, its contribution to climate warming is significant, as it is very effective at absorbing light.

11. Targeting other sources of greenhouse gas emissions, besides carbon dioxide, is also important in climate mitigation efforts. Methane is a powerful short-lived climate pollutant with an effect on global warming 84 times greater than that of carbon dioxide over a 20-year period. ECE has provided best practice guidance for the recovery and use of methane from abandoned coal mines and for methane management in the oil and gas sector. So far, 11 ECE member States have expressed interest in applying the guidance for their gas value chains.

12. Restoring degraded land, including through reforestation, can make a major contribution to climate change mitigation. However, the degradation of land and ecosystems, which is exacerbated by climate change, is one of the greatest challenges facing the ECE region. Desertification affects 8 per cent of the territory of the European Union, including around 14 million ha in Southern, Eastern and Central Europe. Of the total land area of Central Asia, up to 8 per cent of forests are already degraded.

13. Aiming to reverse those adverse trends, ECE, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the World Resources Institute and the World Bank launched a bold call to action to bring 30 million ha of degraded and deforested landscapes into restoration by 2030 in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia in support of the Bonn Challenge, a global restoration target. The country-led initiative, known as “ECCA30”, sets the ambitious restoration target of 30 million ha, an area roughly equivalent to the size of Italy.

14. The initiative aims to position Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia collectively as a powerful player in the global movement for forest landscape restoration. It will build on growing political momentum in the region for land restoration, as enshrined in the Astana Resolution. ECE has already provided support to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in their commitment to restore around 3 million ha of degraded land by 2030 under the Bonn Challenge.

15. By incorporating forest landscape restoration in their post-2020 nationally determined contributions to the Paris Agreement, countries can seize the opportunity for transformative climate action. The initiative aims to make a tangible regional contribution to the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) and drive progress across multiple Sustainable Development Goals.

16. ECE has sought to reach new constituencies and to actively mobilize different actors to tap into the potential of nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation. Trees can have a direct impact on reducing temperatures, cooling the air by 2 to 8 degrees if strategically planted, while at the same time absorbing carbon dioxide. The ECE Executive Secretary launched the Trees in Cities Challenge as a global campaign to combat climate change and foster urban sustainability and resilience. The voluntary initiative seeks to engage urban authorities worldwide to plant over 8.5 million trees by the end of 2020.

17. Climate change will reinforce water pressures, which can be addressed only through international cooperation. Through national policy dialogues on integrated water resources management under the European Union Water Initiative Plus for the Eastern Partnership, ECE supported Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in reforming their water sectors. The overarching aims are to promote intersectoral and transboundary cooperation, to modernize legal and institutional frameworks in line with European Union directives and multilateral environmental agreements and to improve water quality and access to water and sanitation.

18. ECE supported countries of the Western Balkans in taking a basin-wide approach to the sustainable management of the Drina River, shared by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. An integrated set of recommendations will facilitate the balancing of different demands and exploit opportunities around the water-energy-environment nexus, which can unlock new financing possibilities.

19. The work on water cooperation extends beyond the ECE region. Under the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, ECE is helping a number of African countries to build capacities on transboundary water cooperation and international water law and facilitating dialogues on sustainable management of aquifers.

20. There is a close relationship between health and safety concerns and the management of natural resources, a link that transcends national boundaries and calls for international cooperation. ECE assisted Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in aligning and revising legislation and implementing measures to address the adverse environmental and health impacts of economic development in accordance with the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment.

21. The economies of Central Asia rely heavily on activities that produce, process or use large quantities of hazardous substances. The mining waste generated by such activities as the extraction and processing of minerals and metals, including mercury and uranium, cannot be released into the environment and needs to be safely stored in so-called tailings management facilities. In all five Central Asian countries, ECE

has helped to improve the safety of mining waste through different projects, thus addressing a threat that could trigger industrial accidents with transboundary effects.

22. The shift towards a more sustainable transport sector will simultaneously contribute to economic dynamism and the reduction of environmental pressures. Regionally and internationally available standards, instruments and technologies can make a critical difference in strengthening security and reducing the environmental impact of inland transport systems in the region. Enabling efficient international, multimodal transport operations and the smooth processing of freight flows will boost sustainable economic growth in support of the 2030 Agenda.

23. Inland water transport is a viable alternative or complement to road and rail transport on European corridors. Despite being environmentally friendly and, frequently, the most economical mode of inland transport, it remains largely underexploited in Europe. ECE agreements and resolutions establish a comprehensive normative framework for the key aspects of inland navigation, enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of that mode of transport.

24. In early 2020, ECE published a white paper on the progress, accomplishments and future of sustainable inland water transport. The policy paper portrays the current situation, trends and challenges regarding European inland waterways of international importance. It also proposes recommendations in key areas of pan-European cooperation to promote the development of the sector. Proposed responses to identified challenges are closely connected to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the ministerial declaration on inland water transport adopted in Wrocław, Poland, in April 2018.

25. The transformation of the transport sector to meet environmental targets will have far-reaching economic consequences, including in labour markets. Those consequences have been identified in a study on green jobs in transport, looking at the changes resulting from increased investment in public transportation and the continued electrification of private vehicle transport. Similar work on the impact of shifts in the sustainability on employment is being carried out in other sectors. For example, ECE has also assessed the potential of green jobs in the forest sector, including existing opportunities as well as skill requirements and overall adaptation needs.

26. For landlocked economies, well-developed transport links that facilitate their integration into the world economy and subregional cooperation are paramount. Trade and transport connectivity was the key topic of the 2019 Economic Forum of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, held in Ashgabat on 20 and 21 November 2019. The Special Programme has become a platform for intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration with development partners to provide for sustainable development and implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the subregion.

27. Subsequently, the Governing Council of the Special Programme adopted the Ashgabat initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations international legal instruments, norms, standards and best practice recommendations. Special attention will be paid to reducing non-tariff barriers to trade, removing physical and non-physical barriers to transport and fostering sustainable transport and trade facilitation. ECE will work with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, other United Nations entities and development partners on the implementation of the initiative.

28. Connectivity depends not only on the existence of a suitable physical hard infrastructure, such as roads, ports and telecommunication networks, but also on a soft infrastructure that ensures the compatibility of procedures and business practices,

such as electronic data exchange and the quality of logistics, customs and border crossings, for example. The work of ECE, including through its nexus approach, aims to provide integrated solutions that consider the different dimensions of connectivity. A practical example of the approach is an ongoing United Nations Development Account project that will develop a tool enabling countries to measure the degree of connectivity across different dimensions. It will allow policymakers to assess connectivity in terms of the efficiency of land transport, logistics, trade, customs and border crossing.

29. However, transport causes unintended downsides that need to be addressed. Road accidents remain a major killer worldwide. In the ECE region, progress in reducing casualties has stalled or even reversed in some countries. Sustainable Development Goal target 3.6, halving the number of fatalities from road traffic accidents, is far from being on track, both in the region and beyond. ECE contributes to accelerating much-needed progress through its normative, analytical and advisory work but also through the mobilization of financing. In 2019, the first formal call of the United Nations Road Safety Fund, which is hosted by ECE, disbursed \$4 million to projects aimed at reducing road traffic fatalities.

30. The work of ECE in the area of transport has been increasingly accessible to countries beyond the ECE membership. The Inland Transport Committee Strategy until 2030 (see ECE/TRANS/288/Add.2), which was adopted in early 2019, is based on four pillars that are meant to harmonize inland transport developments worldwide and create the safest and most sustainable mobility. The four pillars are the promotion and maintenance of United Nations transport conventions, support for the development of new technologies and innovations in transport with universal standards, the promotion of interregional and global inland transport policy dialogues and the promotion of sustainable regional and interregional inland transport that is interconnected and allows for greater mobility. The adoption of the Strategy signals the further accessibility of the conventions under the Committee's purview to all States Members of the United Nations as a common basis for safer, more sustainable and more accessible mobility.

31. Sustainable development requires a significant transformation of the way in which urban spaces and urban infrastructure are planned and managed. As the ECE region is among the most highly urbanized regions in the world, this is an issue of particular importance for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

32. ECE provides multiple policy advisory services on sustainable urban development. It facilitates the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals through the evaluation of cities' performance using the key performance indicators for smart sustainable cities developed by ECE and the International Telecommunication Union. In 2019, ECE finalized the smart sustainable city profile for the city of Voznesensk, Ukraine. Country profiles on urban development, housing and land management include specific recommendations for policy reforms. The latest one concerned Belarus, ushering a number of new initiatives in the country.

33. The elaboration of standards in different areas is historically a core area of activity for ECE, which is now being oriented towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In addition to creating its own standards, ECE also engages with other standard-setting organizations and contributes to knowledge exchange. An ECE portal allows easy access to over 1,000 standards by more than 30 organizations that support a selected number of targets for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. The portal also displays case studies of how Governments have successfully benefited from those tools for sustainability.

34. People worldwide are living longer. Globally, the old age segment of the population is growing faster than all other age groups. While this is a common trend,

it is in the ECE region where the ageing process is the most advanced, creating some significant challenges that need to be addressed and that are highly relevant for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its promise to leave no one behind.

35. ECE prepares country road maps for mainstreaming ageing, which contain recommendations for the integration of older persons in society, the creation of age-friendly environments, employment opportunities for older workers, social protection, lifelong learning, health and well-being, gender equality and intergenerational solidarity. In 2019, it concluded the road map for Belarus, which directly contributed to the development of the first national strategy on ageing in Belarus, “Dignified Longevity–2030”.

36. In addition to detailed policy advice at the country level, ECE has also developed tools that facilitate the comparison of policy experiences and track progress. The Active Ageing Index allows policymakers to identify areas in which the potential of older persons can be realized to the highest extent possible. As some of the relevant policies are adopted at the subnational level, it is also useful to calculate the index at that level, as well, as was done for Romania and Spain in 2019.

37. The gender dimension cuts across all of the Sustainable Development Goals. Advancing gender equality is therefore a major driver for accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The review of national progress in the empowerment of women and girls and the identification of existing challenges in an international context remain critical for drawing lessons and prompting further action. ECE, together with the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), organized the Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting. The meeting provided a strong platform to discuss how strategies and policies for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action contribute to the realization of the 2030 Agenda.

38. The 2020 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development was conducted as a fully virtual meeting, owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Despite the extraordinary circumstances, it attracted a large number of participants and provided an occasion to reflect on the actions needed to accelerate progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

39. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda needs to engage all levels of government. Cities are vital partners in delivering effective policy action, as many of the critical sustainable development challenges have a clear urban dimension. As part of its efforts to engage new constituencies to accelerate progress in achieving the Goals, ECE organized the Day of Cities on 8 April 2019, which gathered over 50 mayors from 33 ECE member countries to share concrete experiences and priorities in response to key sustainable development challenges. The successful experience has triggered follow-up. The ECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management decided to establish a forum of mayors. Its first session will be held in Geneva on 6 October 2020. It will discuss how to strengthen local governments’ preparedness and response to emergencies, in particular in the light of the COVID-19 crisis, and the impact of disasters and climate change.

40. Effective action requires fully exploiting the synergies offered by the 2030 Agenda for maximum impact. ECE recognized early the importance of an integrated approach and developed a strategy to put it in practice, including through the formation of cross-sectoral teams. As part of its ongoing work, ECE is preparing four analytical studies covering each of four identified nexuses: sustainable use of natural resources; sustainable and smart cities; sustainable mobility and smart connectivity; and measuring and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals. The studies will offer new perspectives to address the interlinkages and complexity of the 2030 Agenda and will inform the future work of ECE.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Trade

41. Promoting regional economic integration is at the heart of the mandate of ECE, which has sought to facilitate economic exchanges throughout the region since its creation. The role of trade is recognized in the 2030 Agenda as an engine for inclusive growth and poverty reduction that can promote sustainable development. The work of ECE has drawn new momentum from the 2030 Agenda to meet its historical mandate in a way that reflects current policy concerns and the needs of its member States, in particular those that face specific challenges in reaching external markets.

42. Trade facilitation directly targets the procedural barriers to trade that raise the costs of moving goods across borders, such as documentation requirements and cumbersome data submission procedures. Trade facilitation efforts have acquired particular relevance given the shifting of the global trade architecture and the ongoing desire to increase regulatory efficiency as a way to improve competitiveness. The long-standing work of ECE on trade facilitation enhances the electronic exchange of information.

43. The United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business develops openly available and harmonized electronic exchange standards to help businesses and government agencies to connect efficiently. Standards developed in 2019 address key issues, such as the supply chain delivery process, eQuality certificates, purchase order financing, smart containers and data pipelines. A 2019 update to ECE guidance on the implementation of a single window in support of trade facilitation measures and a recommendation on single submission portals will help the private sector by streamlining international trade procedures. In addition, the results of the biennial United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation assist ECE member States in reviewing the progress of trade facilitation reforms.

44. Providing a platform and tools for knowledge-sharing is an important direction of the work of ECE. Since 2012, ECE has maintained an online knowledge portal, the Trade Facilitation Implementation Guide (tfig.unece.org). The portal serves as the reference point for information on trade facilitation and e-business, incorporating trade facilitation instruments and guidance from ECE and other relevant international organizations. In 2019 alone, the portal had more than 600,000 unique visitors and over 4 million page views.

45. Non-tariff measures have become the key barriers to trade. Harmonizing and reducing them, while recognizing their potentially important role in pursuing public policy objectives, are critical for countries seeking to be integrated into the global economy. ECE draws on the results of its evidence-based studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade to develop guidelines that help countries to transform their domestic regulatory environment. The aim is to foster synergies between the removal of non-tariff measures and other policies through a whole-of-government approach, in order to enhance national production networks and the conditions for their integration into global value chains.

Innovation

46. As is recognized in the 2030 Agenda, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires innovation. The scope of innovation in the work of ECE stretches far

beyond scientific and technological research and its commercialization to encompass new business models, organizational forms and behavioural patterns.

47. Innovation is the result of a complex multi-stakeholder process, in which governance aspects and linkages between different actors are paramount. ECE supports its member States in their efforts to foster innovation through reviews, policy guidance, dialogue and capacity-building to help them to create vibrant innovation ecosystems that contribute to sustainability.

48. National Innovation for Sustainable Development Reviews are the centrepiece of ECE work on innovation. The reviews are demand-driven and take a comprehensive look at the innovation ecosystem, analysing the scope, quality and efficiency of government policies and of institutions and processes charged with developing, implementing and monitoring them. ECE also supports countries in their efforts to put the review recommendations into practice through capacity-building and policy dialogue. ECE started a review process for Georgia in 2019 and for the Republic of Moldova in January 2020.

49. Reflecting strong country demand, ECE launched the pilot Subregional Innovation Policy Outlook, which reviews innovation policies, institutions and processes among a cluster of countries, starting with those in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. In addition, a new task force to develop policy principles on innovation for sustainable development was created.

50. ECE work on innovation has also provided a new impetus to subregional cooperation. In 2019, the Governing Council of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia adopted the new subregional “Innovation strategy for sustainable development”. The strategy aims to improve the national capacity and capabilities of Special Programme countries to formulate and implement innovation policies for sustainable development. In addition, it seeks to strengthen regional cooperation on innovation for sustainable development.

Finance

51. Advancing the 2030 Agenda requires improved infrastructure that meets social needs, fosters economic dynamism and speeds up the shift towards the green economy. Given the scale of the financing required, contributions from both the public and private sectors are essential. It is also critical that the involvement of the private sector be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

52. Goal 17 identifies public-private partnerships as an important method for delivering infrastructure projects. However, the traditional model for such partnerships has been under heavy criticism for its focus on economic effectiveness at the expense of social and environmental considerations. The pioneering work of ECE on public-private partnerships resulted in a new people-first model, in which partnerships are fit for purpose for the Goals. The ECE approach ensures that the partnerships contribute to the Goals by flagging the importance of social and environmental aspects in addition to the economic ones.

53. The people-first public-private partnership model is gaining traction as an increasing number of member States are implementing the approach. At least five countries in the ECE region have done so: Kazakhstan is revising its legislation on public-private partnerships to incorporate the people-first outcomes, while Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine are incorporating the people-first outcomes in their respective public-private partnership programmes.

54. In the period 2019–2020, ECE launched several new initiatives that will support the implementation of the people-first approach. Key among them are an evaluation

methodology for scoring Goal-compliant infrastructure projects and a set of guidelines to promote resilience in projects and communities through people-first public-private partnerships.

55. Many initiatives with a significant impact on sustainable development should be undertaken at the city level. The work of ECE aims to address financing gaps in the implementation of urban policies, including through innovative financing instruments. ECE has developed guidelines on tools and mechanisms to finance smart sustainable cities projects. In addition, work on improving housing affordability, carried out jointly with Housing Europe, will support governments in developing policies and financial instruments to promote access for all to affordable and adequate housing and urban infrastructure.

56. In any situation, it is critical that financial decisions be taken in a way that is consistent with sustainability principles. The Almaty Guidelines on Promoting the Application of the Principles of the Aarhus Convention in International Forums are applied by regional and global development banks. The three pillars of the Convention, namely access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters, are mainstreamed in various policies of financial institutions, thus supporting improved decision-making.

Data and statistics

57. Informed decision-making and progress assessment require integrated, relevant, timely and easily accessible data. To obtain them, adequate monitoring programmes, data and information management systems, assessment and reporting routines must be in place.

58. The work of ECE on statistics is led by its Statistical Division and is fully aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, facilitating country-led reporting of statistics for the Goals in three main ways. First, ECE is supporting national statistical offices as providers and national coordinators of statistics on the Goals, which includes the preparation of a number of practical tools to facilitate the implementation of the Conference of European Statisticians Road Map on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals at the country level. By the end of 2019, 37 countries in the ECE region had set up their national reporting platforms. Work to prepare the second edition of the *Road Map* has begun.

59. Second, ECE has started regular reporting on the progress of its member countries in implementing the Goals. In March 2020, ECE published the first regional report, in which it highlighted areas in which countries had already fulfilled targets or were making good progress, drew attention to those areas where additional efforts would be needed to ensure that the Goals would be met by 2030 and examined variation across the region. Data on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators for ECE countries are made available through an online dashboard for Sustainable Development Goals that provides graphs, maps and tables for a quick snapshot of the most relevant indicators for ECE countries and through a statistical database that provides more data and possibilities for analysis. The dashboard and database were launched in March 2020.

60. Third, ECE carries out methodological work and national statistical capacity development to inform policy decisions for the achievement of the Goals on demographic, social, economic and environment statistics. In 2019, ECE provided methodological support for measuring progress towards achievement of the Goals in 20 out of 55 statistical areas of the Classification of International Statistical Activities.

61. Five methodological guidelines, which were developed in cooperation with multiple partners, were endorsed by the Conference of European Statisticians. They addressed the following topics: measuring hazardous events and disasters; production of leading, composite and sentiment indicators; satellite accounts for education and training; measuring older populations in institutions; and strategic communications. Seven draft guidelines and recommendations were prepared for discussion by the Conference in 2020, covering such issues as climate change indicators, poverty measurement, censuses and migration.

62. The work of ECE on statistics is particularly attentive to new developments and emerging issues. In 2019, the ECE High-level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics implemented two priority projects: the second phase of the strategic communication framework and the project on machine learning.

63. ECE also carries out statistical and monitoring work addressing the needs of particular sectors, including in relation to reporting needs under existing plans. For example, in the area of the environment, it provides guidance and support to member States to enhance their environmental monitoring and reporting capacities. Together with the United Nations Environment Programme and the European Environment Agency, it works to strengthen the establishment of national environmental monitoring systems and the production of environmental indicators in line with the principles of the Shared Environmental Information System across Europe and Central Asia.

64. In 2019, ECE embarked on the seventh pan-European environmental assessment, which covers: (a) greening the economy in the pan-European region – working towards sustainable infrastructure; and (b) applying principles of the circular economy to sustainable tourism to inform future policy needs.

65. ECE has also been involved in the development of a global core set of forest-related indicators to support the implementation of the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030 and the 2030 Agenda, together with other partners.

66. Capacity-building initiatives have helped to translate methodological work into real change. Since 2018, the Conference of European Statisticians endorsed a new ECE statistical capacity development strategy, which reinforces the principle that capacity development activities should be user-driven. In 2019, ECE carried out 12 regional and 2 national training workshops for the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In addition, several advisory missions were conducted at the request of countries.

67. Capacity-building work is also undertaken at the sectoral level. For example, ECE supported Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in strengthening their national capacity to develop national sets of criteria and indicators, and reporting and accountability systems, for sustainable forest management, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal indicators, in the framework of a United Nations Development Account capacity-building project.

Technical cooperation

68. Technical cooperation activities form an integral part of the work undertaken by ECE and are aimed at improving the national capacity of member States to implement ECE legal instruments, norms and standards to support regional integration and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Through those activities, ECE establishes national and subregional networks of policymakers and technical experts that contribute to the long-term sustainability of the work carried out. Multiplier effects are achieved by targeting cross-border issues and covering a wide range of

beneficiaries in several countries. ECE technical cooperation is guided by the following principles: it should be focused, demand-driven, results-oriented and selective and should build on cooperation and partnerships. The main types of activities include advisory services, capacity-building and field projects.

69. In 2019, ECE delivered over 150 advisory missions and capacity-building activities. Through its Working Group on Technical Cooperation, it identified synergies in sectoral expertise to respond to the interconnectedness of the 2030 Agenda and increased the overall number of cross-sectoral capacity-building activities.

70. ECE strengthened its communication with the resident coordinators and United Nations country teams in 17 United Nations programme countries in the ECE region to discuss opportunities for joint projects and programmes in order to respond to country demands. ECE was actively engaged in and contributed to the planning process for the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework in 11 countries of the ECE region, making ECE expertise available in all three dimensions of sustainable development. It prepared, jointly with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and the United Nations Development Programme, two subregional studies on implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

IV. Promoting the circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources

71. The economies of the ECE region absorb a large amount of resources, resulting in a significant environmental footprint. Domestic material consumption per unit of gross domestic product has been on a long-term declining trend. However, absolute levels of consumption remain high and have shown less change. Given the weight of ECE countries in global resource use, progress in that area has a significance that transcends the region.

72. There is growing policy interest in the circular economy as an approach that seeks to minimize the use of resources and the creation of waste by encouraging recycling and reuse. Such an approach goes beyond the correction of the damaging environmental implications of economic activities to encompass a deep rethinking of the way in which societies produce and consume. The systemic shift is also seen as a source of economic opportunities that can improve productivity and sharpen competitiveness and resilience.

73. In a context of growing demand for natural resources in the region, there is a need for integrated natural resources management across sectors and across borders that taps into the full potential of the circular economy. The work of ECE, which is driven by a nexus approach, contributes to the advancement of the circular economy in various ways, encompassing its normative, advisory and capacity-building functions.

74. The nexus approach relies on internal cross-sectoral cooperation and is underpinned by the formation of a cross-divisional team to drive the cooperation. One of the first results of the nexus work is a study on the natural resources nexus in the ECE region, which will be published and presented to various ECE governing bodies for consideration. It is expected that the lessons learned from the approach will facilitate further integration of sectoral workplans, strengthen internal cooperation and enhance partnerships with other United Nations entities and regional organizations at the transboundary and regional levels.

75. Normative work, which is a core ECE function, is critical for progress in the circular economy, as it provides a common language that facilitates communication and concerted action. New norms and standards will be necessary to support sustainable consumption and production.

76. Overall, the development of the circular economy requires the coordination of multiple actors, across both the public and private sectors and across national boundaries. ECE provides a strong platform to support the dialogue across and between multiple sectors, through multiple intergovernmental groups that are open to relevant stakeholders.

77. ECE also delivers relevant policy advice at the country level through its Environmental Performance Reviews Programme and other advisory activities that bridge the gap between normative work and policy implementation. In 2019, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Romania and Uzbekistan were reviewed.

78. The transformation of the garment and footwear industry in support of the circular economy requires the use of sustainable materials and, critically, reliable certification and traceability systems. Brands are increasingly confronted with the rise of the “conscious consumer”, who questions the environmental footprint of clothes and the social conditions in garment factories and calls for greater transparency and sustainability. According to a 2019 ECE study, however, only about 34 per cent of companies track and trace their value chains.

79. Advanced technologies, such as blockchain, artificial intelligence and the Internet of things, provide an opportunity to increase traceability and sustainability through the creation of a common source of verifiable information on transactions, which is accessible to all parties in the supply chain, regardless of their location. ECE, with the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, is working to provide the industry with a concrete solution to advance transparency, trust and due diligence.

80. More specifically, the ECE project on enhancing the transparency and traceability of sustainable value chains in the garment and footwear sector, which is jointly implemented with the International Trade Centre and the International Labour Organization (ILO), is developing a supporting normative framework and a technical standard for full traceability of the value chain in the industry. The project also envisages capacity-building activities to disseminate project outcomes globally. A blockchain pilot for a sustainable and circular cotton value chain is being implemented with key industry partners to test the project approach through the application of advanced technologies.

81. Advancing the circular economy requires innovative approaches to use new and existing materials while reducing waste. The forest sector offers materials with a lower environmental impact by virtue of being biodegradable and renewable, such as cellulose products. The potential role of the forest sector in the circular economy and the transformation of the fashion industry was brought to a larger audience through awareness-raising events organized at the 5th European Forest Week and an exhibition on the theme “Forests for fashion” at the Fourth United Nations Environment Assembly. Forest certification in the process is key to ensure sustainability: knowing that the fibres come from a forest that is certified as being sustainably managed gives confidence to producers and consumers that those forests will be around for generations.

82. However, it is also necessary to improve resource use in the forest sector to enhance its contribution to the circular economy: an estimated 25 per cent of the 2018 timber harvest in Europe was damaged by either storms or insects. The ECE region forest sector accounts for 60 per cent of wood provision worldwide, so dynamics in

the region have global significance. The *Forest Products Annual Market Review* published by ECE and FAO, which is the main information source for the region's forest sector, and the market discussions around the publication put a special focus on innovations to utilize dead, overstocked and damaged trees, supporting the circular economy, and to increase the resilience of forests to fires and related climate risks.

83. Food loss and waste represent a massive squandering of resources, equivalent to an average of 300 kg per capita in Europe and North America. The significance of reducing food loss and waste is explicitly recognized in the 2030 Agenda, as seen in target 12.3, which is to halve existing levels by 2030. The ECE FeedUP@UN application provides data on the interdependencies and connections across different sectors at various levels of the supply chain. The application allows the agro-industries and trade sectors to systematically collect and disseminate data on food flows with the aim of reducing loss in handling fruit and vegetables in the supply chains.

84. ECE normative work, including the development of new standards, can make a significant contribution to improving the management of natural resources and avoiding their depletion. The Fisheries Language for Universal Exchange messaging standard continued to be applied throughout the fisheries of the world, from the European Union, where its use is compulsory, to countries beyond the region, including Brazil, Thailand and Uruguay. The standard makes a direct contribution to achieving Goal 14 by enabling the detection and prevention of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

85. Interest in the circular economy is translating into renewed mandates for ECE work. For example, the joint session of the ECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry and the FAO European Forestry Commission, held in Geneva in November 2019, gave the joint ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section a mandate to look into tools for the implementation of circular concepts in the forest sector, including by exploring the issue of wood-based value chains in a circular economy.

86. The use of common, internationally harmonized specifications regarding the classification of and reporting on energy and other resources is critical for the effective management of natural resources. ECE has prepared new specifications for the classification of and reporting on solar and wind energy, which are part of the United Nations Framework Classification for Resources. With that, the Framework Classification has taken yet another step towards becoming the global system of classification for the world's energy system. The Framework Classification is now operational for solar, wind, bioenergy and geothermal energy, and the ECE Expert Group on Resource Management is developing further specifications for hydropower and marine energy.

87. The specifications will make it possible to assess the energy resources in different geographical contexts in comparison with alternative energy sources. The ability of governments and companies to understand and compare competing energy sources is essential for navigating energy transitions and transformations.

88. The global deployment of the Framework Classification continues to advance, including in Asia, where it is led by the Coordinating Committee for Geoscience Programmes in East and Southeast Asia, and in Europe, where it is led by the European Commission, which also tested the Framework Classification in the context of its Strategic Action Plan on Batteries to gather harmonized data on primary raw materials availability: 19 European Union member States reported on cobalt, lithium, nickel and graphite.

89. In the ECE region, there has been continued progress in increasing the share of renewable energy in the total energy supply. However, there are still large differences

across countries and, in some of them, the relative importance of renewables remains low.

90. Increases in renewable energy are closely related to broader questions of natural resource management, as they are interlinked with water, agroforestry and ecosystem issues. Those links demand an integrated approach that considers both the positive and negative effects of renewable energy expansion on other sectors. In transboundary basins, the impacts can spread across borders.

91. ECE seeks to support renewable energy policymakers in identifying and addressing synergies and trade-offs by guiding them through the three parallel “tracks” of the renewable energy development process: strategic planning; policy design and adoption; and project development. The aim is to help policymakers in broadening cooperation across sectors, exploring financing and partnership opportunities, maximizing the benefits of renewables and reducing their negative impact on the environment.

92. Work in that area builds on the results of two types of multi-stakeholder dialogues supported by ECE: the renewable energy “hard talks”, aimed at identifying barriers and policy responses to renewable energy deployment, and the water-food-energy-ecosystem nexus assessments, carried out under the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes to support cross-sectoral and transboundary cooperation.

93. An effective management of natural resources and progress towards a circular economy require good data on industrial processes that are publicly accessible. Under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), a unique instrument has been adopted, the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers, which represents a prototype for establishing reporting by industry on pollutant releases and waste transfers and for providing public access to related information. The Protocol is the only global legally binding treaty on the subject. Pollutant release and transfer register systems can be used to improve the monitoring and controlling of input and output parameters from industrial activities, such as energy consumption, pollutant releases and transfer of waste.

94. ECE, together with other partners, is helping countries to establish effective pollutant release and transfer register systems that meet common international standards, thus meeting demands for currently unavailable but critical data. In addition, such registers can be used for reporting obligations under other national and international instruments (e.g. multilateral environmental agreements) thus helping companies and authorities to save resources and avoid duplication of efforts.

95. The Executive Committee of ECE has decided that the theme for the high-level segment of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission, which will be held in April 2021, will be “Promoting the circular economy and the sustainable use of natural resources in the ECE region”, with the aim of facilitating peer learning and synergies across subprogrammes. The ways in which an integrated, multisectoral approach that leverages ECE norms, standards, conventions and good practice guidance can support member States in their efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda will also be showcased.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

96. ECE works regularly with multiple partners and is actively seeking new alliances to enhance the impact and reach of its activities. In some cases, partnerships have a strong institutional foundation, as is the case for ECE work on forest issues. ECE has been working with FAO through their joint Forestry and Timber Section for

more than 70 years, strengthening sustainable forest management in the ECE region. The Team of Specialists on Green Jobs in the Forest Sector – Joint ILO/ECE/FAO Expert Network works on green jobs in the forest sector, while ECE collaboration with ILO serves to address a range of safety and decent work issues in the forest sector.

97. ECE is very active in the development of standards and has engaged other organizations in tackling an ambitious but necessary change: leveraging the potential of standards for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Standards are too often geared to the needs of a stereotypical male reference or are developed and implemented without women's participation. As this is a pervasive feature, removing the bias requires the engagement of multiple partners.

98. In 2019, ECE launched a groundbreaking partnership with standards communities to promote a gender-balanced and inclusive process for the development of standards. In May 2019, the ECE Declaration for Gender Responsive Standards and Standards Development was opened for signature and, by March 2020, it had already been signed by more than 60 standards organizations worldwide. Standards organizations have started to implement the Declaration, for example by developing a standard on equal wages or encouraging the participation of non-governmental organizations that represent the interests of rural and marginalized women in standardization and ensuring the participation of women in international standardization events.

99. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals require joint action and strengthened cooperation among United Nations organizations. In the ECE region, more than 30 United Nations entities pool their expertise and join hands to maximize the impact of their work across Europe and Central Asia. Joint analysis, advocacy, policy coordination and country support on a number of cross-cutting issues have become standard practice in the region and will be further strengthened with the implementation of the reform recommendations of the United Nations development system at the regional level.

100. Joint meetings are held regularly with the aim of coordinating inter-agency activities and ensuring policy coherence of the regional United Nations system. The meetings bring together regional directors and heads of United Nations regional offices. They are jointly organized and co-led by the ECE Executive Secretary, in her capacity as Chair of the Regional Coordination Mechanism, and by the United Nations Development Programme Regional Director, in her capacity as Chair of the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group Team for Europe and Central Asia. Regional task forces clustered around cross-cutting policy issues facilitate concerted action between different United Nations agencies and partners at the operational level. The issue-based coalitions are guided by the regional United Nations system meetings.

101. ECE has recently joined the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in co-leading a new issue-based coalition on environment and climate change. The coalition's work will be based on three pillars: strengthening environmental governance and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda; supporting countries in the environmental dimension of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and common country assessment processes; and monitoring and reporting on the environmental and climate change dimension of the Goals.

102. ECE joins forces with other partners to conduct large-scale studies. For example, in the period 2020–2021, it will be working with the United Nations Environment Programme and the European Environment Agency to prepare a pan-European environmental assessment that will look at developments in the region

driving environmental change and the resulting pressures on different environmental media. The assessment will involve numerous international organizations, as well as member States, in examining the state and trends of environmental and related indicators, which will be linked with Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

103. ECE has sought to change existing practices and promote its Framework Guidelines for Energy Efficiency Standards in Buildings by partnering with non-governmental organizations to develop a network of international centres of excellence on high-performance buildings. As part of the initiative, it concluded a memorandum of understanding with the Green Building Alliance in 2019.

104. ECE has also engaged with local authorities and other partners to develop a network of centres of excellence that will support the implementation of the Geneva Charter on Sustainable Housing. In 2019, it reached an agreement with the city of Trondheim, Norway, regarding the establishment of a centre of excellence on Sustainable Development Goal city transition, which will join the ones existing in Albania, Austria, Estonia and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

VI. Conclusion

105. Normative frameworks developed by ECE have a proven value in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Normative production should evolve and adapt to tackle new challenges. In 2019, there were different instances of existing ECE norms, standards, guidelines and classifications complementing existing work or extending into new areas to tackle existing needs.

106. However, the development of normative outputs is not enough. The outputs need to be generally accepted and put into action. Over the past year, the use of many ECE normative instruments has increased, both within and beyond the region. Expanding the use of normative instruments is facilitated by the engagement of different partners and, critically, by technical cooperation activities that help member States to build needed capacities and address impediments preventing the application of the instruments.

107. ECE has used its convening power to mobilize different stakeholders. It will continue to reach out not only to member States but also to other constituencies to implement various action-oriented initiatives with tangible results. Strengthening monitoring and data systems remains critical to track progress and assess the effectiveness of actions.

108. Sustainable development challenges are multifaceted and demand integrated solutions. The adoption by ECE of new working methods to tap into the increased demand for cross-sectoral approaches is bearing fruit. Exploiting the synergies of the 2030 Agenda will be critical to accelerating progress and will remain a key strategic direction in the future work of ECE.