

**DIALOGUE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARIES OF THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS  
WITH THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY SECOND COMMITTEE**

**“The UN at 75 – Regional Cooperation: A building block of multilateralism and  
shared prosperity in the era of Covid-19 and beyond”**

**75<sup>TH</sup> Session of the UNGA, Monday, 19 October, 10:00 AM-12:00 PM**

**Statement by Ms. Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary**

**Around 1,400 words for 10 minutes**

We are living through unprecedented circumstances. Countries are suffering multiple -and ongoing- shocks. Existing fragilities are being exacerbated. The world has become more uncertain and we have become more painfully aware that risks do sometimes materialize.

The abrupt changes introduced by the pandemic have led to the questioning of many existing beliefs and prompted a reconsideration of our actions -as individuals and collectively.

But, amid all this crumbling reality, there is one tenet that has stood well: multilateralism remains essential to solve the problems of this troubled world. Forging the necessary consensus may not be always easy but there is simply no viable alternative to tackle the challenges that humankind is facing. Mitigating climate change, reducing environmental pressures, coping with the implications of demographic changes, harnessing the benefits of trade.... All this will be more difficult, if not impossible, if we do not work together. The COVID-19 crisis has shown the limitations of uncoordinated actions and the damage that the unraveling of cooperation can bring.

But, despite this, and the impressive track record that multilateralism can boast when we look back, this is a time when renewing our commitment to collective action is still necessary. And, as in the past, regional cooperation offers the most suitable platform to advance multilateralism. It is at this level that reconnecting economies, reversing the disruption of trade and transport links, and addressing transboundary risks offers more immediate benefits.

The critical task of strengthening trust in international cooperation may yield clearer results in the context of regional frameworks of collaboration, which should be reinforced as essential building blocks for multilateralism. A recommitment to these frameworks will contribute to improve perceptions regarding future concerted action, thus reducing uncertainty, which has increased to extraordinary levels in the current crisis.

The creation of the UN Economic Commission for Europe in 1947 was an expression of a shared belief in the role of international institutions. UNECE emerged in a devastated Europe, where the

ravages of war had left behind wretched human conditions, damaged basic infrastructure and severely disrupted international trade networks. It was thought that international cooperation could support economic recovery in Europe and, through the improvement of economic conditions, provide a solid foundation for the preservation of peace in the continent. Through the years, the focus of activities has evolved but UNECE's mandate to facilitate concerted action for economic development and integration of the region remains unchanged- and relevant.

UNECE is now ready to strengthen its support to member States to reap the benefits of regional cooperation, in circumstances that, although not as dramatic as the post-war reconstruction, are also testing. Change is being forced upon us and we need to take advantage of the opportunities that are emerging in this crisis to "build back better". The 2030 Agenda, our blueprint for collective action in support of sustainable development, alerts us of other looming crises that need to be avoided.

UNECE Action Framework for Responses to the COVID-19 crisis include three main pillars:

- Facilitate connectivity, including by enhanced cooperation and implementation of a regulatory framework for border crossings and the use of digital tools in trade and transport
- Address transboundary and other risks, using UNECE multilateral agreements, standards and statistical frameworks for informed decision-making
- Support a green and resilient recovery, including by improved resource use and the promotion of the circular economy, tapping into the potential of cities as drivers of the recovery.

Let me share with you some of the examples of our work under these three main pillars.

#### On connectivity:

The COVID-19 crisis has undermined the very fabric of international economic relations: connectivity and trade. Connectivity has been impaired by restrictions to mobility and health compliance requirements. The fall of trade in the UNECE region this year is likely to be in double digits, being a major factor in the contraction of economic activity. Harnessing the potential of trade to support the recovery is an essential component of an effective response to the COVID-19 crisis

To support connectivity, we launched an Observatory on Border Crossings Status, which gathers all information on cross-border limitations worldwide, directly from governments, partner organizations and the transport sector. Regional coordination can facilitate cross-border and transit freight transport and reduce the cost of compliance, especially regarding essential products like food and medical supplies.

UNECE has developed multiple normative instruments on transport that facilitate connectivity, which are proving particularly useful in these circumstances. TIR connects over 70 economies around the world – including the EU, China, India, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and landlocked developing countries including all of Central Asia, and Afghanistan. TIR cuts transport times by nearly 60% and costs by up to 40%. This can help to maintain or resume trade flows safely and securely. The digitalized “eTIR” system can reduce virus transmission risks by minimising physical contact between customs officers and truck drivers.

UNECE also offers hundreds of freely available standards and recommendations for trade facilitation. These enable dematerialized trade processes that reduce physical contact throughout global supply chains. These tools include Single Window, Single Submission Portals, eBusiness standards and many others.

Furthermore, through policy advice, we help countries remove regulatory and procedural barriers to trade. Our studies have helped or are helping countries in Caucasus and Central Asia, to harness trade and integrate into regional and global value chains as a tool drive sustainable development.

#### On transboundary and other risks

UNECE has developed multiple normative instruments to address transboundary and other environmental risks. We should seize the opportunity created by the crisis to address structural challenges and strengthen normative frameworks to deal with these risks.

Air pollution, for example, can only be effectively tackled when addressing long-range transboundary sources. Falling levels of pollutants as a result of abatement measures prompted by the UNECE Air Convention have been spectacular: emissions of a series of harmful substances have been reduced by 40 to 80% since 1990 in Europe. This has increased average life expectancy by one year. This is a tangible achievement on which we can build to continue to improve air quality in the region, which remains the major source of environmental health risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic is prompting an increased awareness of the need to deal with various types of risks. This demands an appropriate assessment of infrastructure at an early stage of planning to fully incorporate environmental and health risks, including their transboundary dimensions. Our Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment can help ensure that these aspects are considered in countries’ economic and regional development planning. The Protocol is open to accession by all UN member States, and we stand ready to support countries in joining and applying it.

#### On the green and resilient recovery

The stimulus packages being adopted across the region must become an opportunity to advance sustainability, including by addressing climate change, resource use and other environmental concerns. As we address the pressing needs of the present, we need to build more solid foundations for a sustainable future.

The economic disruption created by the crisis is leading to a reconsideration of resource use and the fragility of supply lines. We need to rethink our consumption and production modes and to strengthen approaches that enhance both resilience and efficiency, such as the circular economy, which can be deployed in a regional context through the creation of appropriate platforms.

The region's circular material use rate has improved in recent years, but it remains at just 11.2% in the EU, according to the latest available data. In Europe and Central Asia, only around one third of waste materials are recovered through recycling and composting. Much work needs to be done on this area. UNECE is strongly engaged in developing the standards and guidelines needed to accelerate shift to a more circular economy, including in the food and textile industries, in transport, resource recovery and waste.

Promoting the circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the UNECE region will be the theme of the sixty-ninth Session of the Commission, to be held in April 2021.

And finally-

An effective multilateralism requires involving all relevant actors. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda demands strong actions at the local level. UNECE brought together representatives from local governments from the region in the first Forum of Mayors early this month to share concrete experiences on how to strengthen local resilience, including to COVID-19, climate change and natural hazards

We will build back better if we build together.

Thank you.