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Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE Region

Tenth session

Geneva, 21 and 22 April 2026

Report of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the Economic Commission for Europe Region on its tenth session

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I. Attendance

1. The tenth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE Region was held as an in-person meeting at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on 21 and 22 April 2026.
2. The session was co-chaired by H.E. Mr. Timcho Mucunski, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of North Macedonia, and H.E. Mr. László Borbély, State Secretary, Government Councillor and Head of the Sustainable Development Department of the Government of Romania.
3. The session was attended by representatives of the following 46 ECE member States: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova (Republic of), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Uzbekistan. The non-ECE member States who attended were China, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, and the United Arab Emirates.
4. The European Union (EU) was represented by the Delegation of the European Union to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva, European Commission, and the European Economic and Social Committee.
5. Representatives of the following UN bodies, departments, funds and programmes, specialized agencies, related organizations and initiatives attended the meeting: United Nations Office of Geneva (UNOG) Beyond Lab, DCO (Development Coordination Office), ECE (Economic Commission for Europe), ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), EOSG (Executive Office of the Secretary-General), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), ILO (International Labour Organization), IOM (International Organization for Migration), ITC (International Trade Centre), ITU (International Telecommunication Union), OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), UN Global Compact (United Nations Global Compact), UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme), UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization), UNITAR (United Nations Institute for Training and Research), UNOG (United Nations Office at Geneva), UNOOSA (United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs), UNOPS (United Nations Office for Project Services), WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), WMO (World Meteorological Organization). Resident coordinators and representatives from resident coordinators' offices from 5 countries also attended.
6. Representatives of the following intergovernmental and regional organizations participated in the session: Council of Europe, EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), ICPDR (International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River), IDLO (International Development Law Organization), ISO (International Organization for Standardization), IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), PAM (Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean), RCC (Regional Cooperation Council), SIC ICWC (Scientific Information Center of Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia).
7. Representatives of about 100 non-governmental organizations and representatives of youth, academia, the private sector and other organizations also participated. A complete list of participants can be found on the website of the regional forum (<https://regionalforum.unece.org/events/regional-forum-sustainable-development-2026>).

II. Opening of the session and adoption of the agenda

8. The regional forum adopted the provisional agenda of the session, as contained in document ECE/RFSD/2026/1.

9. In their opening remarks, the Co-Chairs underscored the urgency of accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with less than five years remaining until 2030. They invited participants to consider the 2030 Agenda not just as an abstract vision, but rather as a concrete test of whether we can transform our economies, strengthen our societies and act together at scale. They highlighted both the achievements and uneven progress across the ECE region, noting that recent crises have exposed structural vulnerabilities and slowed momentum. Emphasis was placed on delivery, policy coherence and the importance of regional and multistakeholder partnerships to sustain long-term transformation. The Regional Forum was positioned as a platform for honest stocktaking, peer learning and evidence-based solutions, with focused discussions on key Goals, innovative policy approaches, and outcomes to be conveyed to the High-Level Political Forum in New York (7-15 July 2026).

10. In a video message, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, underscored the growing urgency of advancing the SDGs amid compounding crises, including geopolitical tensions, climate stress and biodiversity loss. She cautioned that declining development finance and disrupted supply chains were widening the SDG financing gap and slowing progress, despite the region's continued strengths in areas such as energy efficiency and access to services. While highlighting country-level examples of resilience and innovation, she stressed that overall progress remains off-track. Accelerated, better-financed and data-driven implementation, strengthened partnerships and regionally coordinated UN support were identified as essential to translating shared purpose into tangible progress toward 2030.

11. The ECE Executive Secretary, Ms. Tatiana Molcean, highlighted the increasingly complex context for sustainable development in the region, marked by conflict, rising living costs, fiscal pressures and declining public trust. While progress on the SDGs remains uneven, she stressed that nearly 80% of measurable targets are still moving in the right direction, reflecting resilience and sustained policy effort. She underscored the continued relevance of the 2030 Agenda and the need to accelerate action through stronger partnerships across governments, the private sector, civil society, academia and youth. Emphasis was placed on UN system reforms, including at the regional level, to deliver more coherent and effective support, and on addressing structural challenges related to climate change, demographic shifts, technological transformation, peace and inclusion.

12. The ITU Secretary-General, Ms. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, emphasized the importance of strong partnerships and collective transformation to advance sustainable development in an increasingly digital world. She highlighted the long-standing collaboration between ITU and ECE, particularly in areas such as smart cities, mobility and digital cooperation. Stressing that digital technologies have moved from the margins to the centre of development strategies, she warned that 2.2 billion people remain offline. She underscored the role of digital cooperation, including artificial intelligence governance and inclusive digital transformation, as critical enablers of the 2030 Agenda. Regional leadership, regulatory innovation and initiatives to promote digital inclusion, especially for women and girls, were highlighted as key drivers of equitable progress.

13. The UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Road Safety, Mr. Jean Todt, highlighted the growing urgency of advancing sustainable and safe mobility in an increasingly urbanized ECE region, where a large and rising share of the population lives in cities. He underscored road safety as a critical public health challenge, noting that road crashes continue to claim thousands of lives annually, disproportionately affecting pedestrians, cyclists and users of micro-mobility. While recognizing progress achieved through regulation, investment and international conventions, he stressed that overall advances remain insufficient. He called for concrete, evidence-based measures, including lower speed limits, stronger safety standards and sustained political commitment, and emphasized the importance of translating forum discussions on mobility for sustainable cities into tangible outcomes and action.

14. The UNDP Regional Director and Co-Vice-Chair of the Regional Collaborative Platform, Ms. Ivana Živković, stressed the urgent need to accelerate progress in Europe and Central Asia by moving from fragmented initiatives to coordinated, large-scale delivery of the 2030 Agenda. She highlighted the UN system's role in supporting governments through integrated policy advice, capacity development and catalytic financing, with a strong focus on climate action and leaving no one behind. She cited concrete examples, including strengthened transboundary water cooperation, digital and infrastructure transformation, and North Macedonia's green financing facility.

III. High-level policy segment: “Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals in the ECE region for a sustainable future for all”

15. The high-level policy segment was opened by a keynote speech by Ms. Nathalie Bernasconi-Osterwalder, Vice-President, Global Strategies and Managing Director, Europe, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).

16. The key findings of the 2026 UNECE SDG Progress Report¹ were presented by the Chief, Social and Demographic Statistics Section, ECE Statistics and Data Division, Mr. Andres Vikat.

17. The following delegations intervened in the ensuing plenary debate: Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, European Union, Germany, Italy, Kazakhstan, Moldova (Republic of), North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Representatives of civil society and youth reported on preparatory meetings and consultations. The Swiss Bankers Association, PAM and IOM also took the floor. The Russian Federation and the European Union exercised their rights of reply.

IV. Peer learning Round Tables²

SDG 6

Achievements, Opportunities and Future Pathways – On the Road to the 2026 UN Water Conference

18. The round table was led by ECE and UNESCO with contributions from FAO, IUCN, UNDP, UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNOPS, and WMO. It was moderated by Ms. Paola Deda, Director, Environment and Forests Division, ECE, Ms. Magdalena Landry, Director, Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, UNESCO, Ms. Sophie Thomasset, Deputy Director in charge of SDGs, French Water Partnership, and Mr. James Dalton, Global Director of Water and Wetlands, IUCN. Presentations, as listed in the programme, were made by: Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Moldova (Republic of), Portugal, Senegal, Slovenia, United Arab Emirates, Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia (ICWC), International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, UN Resident Coordinator in Armenia, ECE, UNESCO, civil society and youth.

¹ Available at <https://w3.unece.org/sdg2026/>.

² Further information on the peer learning round tables is available at <https://regionalforum.unece.org/events/rfsd-2026-round-tables>.

SDG 7

Successes and Lessons Learned on Advancing Resilient and Sustainable Energy Systems in the UNECE Region

19. The round table was led by ECE and UNDP with contributions from ILO, ITU, OHCHR, UNCTAD, UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNOPS, UN WOMEN, and WMO. The three-themed discussions were moderated by Mr. Stefan M. Buettner, Chair of the Group of Experts on Energy Efficiency, Germany, Ms. Roberta Boscolo, Head, Climate and Energy Unit, WMO, and Mr. Didier Trebucq, UN Resident Coordinator in Georgia. Presentations, as listed in the programme, were made by: Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, ITU, OHCHR, UNCTAD, UNDP, and WMO, as well as by youth and civil society.

SDG 9

Smart Procurement, Smart Mobility: Catalysing Innovation for Resilient Infrastructure

20. The round table was led by ECE and UNIDO. The keynote speech was given by Ms. Matilde Mordt, UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia. It was moderated by Ms. Elisabeth Tuerk, Director, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, ECE, and Mr. Dmitry Mariyasin, Deputy Executive Secretary, ECE. Presentations, as listed in the programme, were made by: Germany, Montenegro, Iceland, Italy, Switzerland, United Kingdom, University of Hasselt, Belgium and University of Deusto, Spain, Compare Foundation, Sweden, as well as by China Automobile Standards Internationalization Center, Naftogaz Group, Transpolis, Transports Publics Genevois, youth and civil society.

SDG 11

Implementation and Localization: Progress, Challenges and Enablers

21. The lead organizers were ECE and UN-Habitat, in collaboration with FAO, IOM, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), UNFPA, and WMO. It was moderated by Ms. Aline Matta, Head of Geneva Office a.i. and Head, United Nations Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities (UNITAC) and Data and Innovation Section, UN-Habitat, and Mr. Andreas Piller, Senior Expert on Sustainable Mobility, Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI). Presentations, as listed in the programme, were made by: Austria (also representing the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP)), Norway, Slovenia, Spain (also representing the Spanish Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities), Switzerland (and Chair of the ECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management), United Kingdom (also representing the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe); UN Resident Coordinator in Turkmenistan, EBRD, City of Heidelberg (Germany) (and Chair of the UN Forum of Mayors), City of Tbilisi (Georgia), Province of Potenza (Italy), Strășeni District (Republic of Moldova), Geneva Public Transport, Systematica (consultancy company to the UN4Ukrainian cities project), as well as youth and civil society.

SDG 17

Partnerships for Human-Centric Inclusive Digital Transformation

22. The lead organizers were ITU, ECE, UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia in collaboration with FAO, UNFPA, UN Women, and WMO. Scene-setting remarks were provided by H.E. Mr. László Borbély, State Secretary, Government Councillor and Head of the Sustainable Development Department of the Government of Romania and RFSD Co-Chair, and Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head, ITU Office for Europe. The keynote message was given by H.E. Michal Gramatyka, Secretary of State, Deputy Minister for Digital

Affairs of the Republic of Poland. The round table was moderated by Ms. Caroline Tissot, UN Resident Coordinator in Montenegro and Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder. Presentations, as listed in the programme, were made by: Albania, Andorra, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Slovenia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Council of Europe, ITU Youth Envoy and Global Youth Ambassador, NITEC, as well as civil society.

V. Plenary session: “Driving Sustainable Futures: Integrated and Innovative Solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals”

23. The Co-Chairs reported back on the key messages from the peer learning round tables on SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17.

24. The Co-Chairs then introduced the moderated multi-stakeholder panel discussion on Beyond GDP entitled “Valuing What Counts – Rethinking Progress in the UNECE Region in an Age of Crises”, moderated by Mr. Paul Ladd, Director, Sustainable Development and Population Division, ECE, and Ms. Özge Aydoğan, Director, UNOG Beyond Lab. The setting of the scene for the imperative of moving beyond GDP was presented by Professor Enrico Giovannini, University of Rome; Scientific Director of the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS); and member of the UN High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP. The panellists were:

- Ms. Anu Peltola, Director, UNCTAD Statistics, Data and Digital Service
- Mr. Peter Benczur, Scientific Officer, Joint Research Centre, European Commission
- Mr. Genaro Matias Godoy, Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) Global Focal Point for Financing for Development Youth Constituency and Head of Research and Policy of Global Youth Coalition (youth representative)
- Mr. David Perejil, Director General for the 2030 Agenda, Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs, and the 2030 Agenda, Spain
- Mr. Florian Brod, German UN Youth Delegate for Sustainable Development, Youth Network on Beyond GDP
- Ms. Rianne Roshier, Swiss CSO Platform Agenda 2030 Switzerland (civil society representative)

25. The following delegations took part in the ensuing plenary debate: Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) also took the floor.

26. A summary of the discussions in the plenaries and peer learning sessions is contained in the annex to the present report. Written statements and other related materials are available on the website of the regional forum (<https://regionalforum.unece.org/events/regional-forum-sustainable-development-2026>).

VI. Closing

27. In the closing remarks delivered on behalf of the Director-General of UNOG, Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, participants were commended for their commitment to advancing the SDGs at a critical juncture five years before 2030. The speaker stressed that insufficient progress risks undermining the credibility of multilateralism amid geopolitical, economic and climate challenges. Emphasis was placed on the forum’s role in fostering cooperation among governments, civil society and experts, advancing solutions in water, energy and innovation, and promoting a broader understanding of human progress beyond GDP. The remarks reaffirmed UNOG’s support for dialogue, inclusiveness and results-based multilateral cooperation.

28. In his closing remarks, the ECE Deputy Executive Secretary, Mr. Dmitry Mariyasin, reaffirmed the continued relevance of the SDGs as a guiding framework, while acknowledging that progress remains off track in many areas as the 2030 deadline approaches. He emphasized the region’s contributions to policy innovation, digitalization and data-driven solutions, including the use of artificial intelligence, particularly in transport, energy and urban development. The speaker stressed the importance of inclusive design, demographic

awareness and translating innovation into real-world impact. He concluded by underscoring the central role of partnerships and collective action in advancing sustainable development.

29. The Co-Chairs underlined that sustainable development remains achievable even in times of crisis and can itself form part of the solution. They emphasized the indispensable role of regional cooperation and highlighted ECE as a key platform for dialogue, peer learning and partnerships, including the active engagement of non-state stakeholders. Marking the International Day of Planet Earth, they reiterated the need to protect the planet while ensuring no one is left behind. Before closing, the Co-Chairs thanked the secretariat, organizers and participants for their contributions and outlined the next steps for preparing and submitting the report including the Chairs' summary of the discussions to the HLPF.

Annex

Co-Chairs' summary of the discussions

High-level policy segment on the theme “Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals in the Economic Commission for Europe region for a sustainable future for all”

1. With fewer than five years until 2030, member States highlighted the critical situation in which a clear acceleration in delivery is called for, paired with sustained engagement and credible partnerships. In a more demanding context than in 2015, when the 2030 Agenda was adopted, overlapping crises – including armed conflicts in and beyond the ECE region – and structural challenges are constraining long-term investment in sustainable development. Speakers emphasized that these crises do not diminish the relevance of the 2030 Agenda; on the contrary, the Regional Forum continues to provide a space to meaningfully connect stakeholders, facilitate debate and inspire actions.
2. Across interventions, leadership was framed less in terms of ambition or target-setting and more in terms of coherence, implementation, capacity and delivery at scale. Participants highlighted the responsibility of the ECE region to demonstrate that sustainability, resilience and competitiveness can advance together through evidence-based policies and strong regional cooperation.
3. The keynote intervention provided an assessment of regional progress, noting that only a small share of measurable SDG targets is on track to be achieved by 2030. This is taking place in a time in which staying optimistic is increasingly a struggle, with conflict and geopolitical fragmentation rising, environmental pressure intensifying and inequalities growing. At the same time, there is a ray of optimism guiding progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The existence of the 2030 Agenda itself brought together economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability in a single holistic structure. With its SDGs, the 2030 Agenda has allowed Member States to compare data and identify gaps, discuss challenges, and provide a forum for peer learning.
4. As further stressed in the keynote address, the situation in 2026 obliges the international community to consider not only solutions to deal with the challenges identified, but also how to deliver solutions. At the time of writing, it was still the case that harmful subsidies continued to threaten the environment. Fossil fuel subsidies continued to burden the transition to clean alternatives, and underpricing of water could undermine efficiency in the long term. Three critical levers for accelerating progress were identified. First, aligning incentives by addressing environmentally and socially harmful subsidies that lock in unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. Second, making more strategic use of existing public tools, particularly public procurement, to shape markets, drive innovation and support sustainable infrastructure. Third, redefining how progress is measured, including through the Beyond GDP agenda, to ensure that policy decisions reflect well-being, resilience and equity rather than economic growth alone.
5. The presentation of the 2026 ECE SDG Progress Report highlighted that, at the regional level, 19 targets were assessed as on track. The majority of targets required acceleration. Despite these findings, trends remained positive for approximately 80 per cent of measurable targets, indicating a degree of resilience across the region. Persistent gaps were identified in areas such as water stress, energy efficiency, investment levels and financing for sustainable development.
6. To interpret the assessment, it was important to understand that the ambitious target values are derived from the “champions area” approach that assesses progress with selected top performers; and that two thirds of countries in the ECE region are high-income and another quarter are upper middle-income. In that context, the region as a whole performed well on goal 6 for clean water and sanitation, access to safe drinking water, for instance. For

goal 7, energy intensity was declining and investment in energy infrastructure was strengthening. The region achieved widespread access to information and communication technology to continue toward digital connectivity for all (Goal 9). Under Goal 11, urban air quality and waste management are all on track and progress was made in addressing inadequate housing especially in program countries. Programme countries faced additional capacity and financing constraints despite broadly similar progress patterns. Improving data availability and statistical capacity was identified as essential for evidence-based policymaking and effective monitoring of progress.

7. During the plenary discussion, several delegations stressed the continuing need for the region to strengthen environmental sustainability as part of the broader sustainable development framework. Member States identified water security as an increasingly strategic issue for sustainable development across the ECE region. Several countries underlined that climate change, pollution and unsustainable use of water resources were intensifying pressures on surface and groundwater, with impacts on ecosystems, public health and economic activities. Delegations including Austria, Switzerland, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan emphasized that water-related risks were no longer confined to traditionally water-scarce areas, as droughts, floods and declining water quality increasingly affected diverse geographical contexts. The Russian Federation highlighted efforts to restore ecosystems, including mountain and forest wetlands and lakes. Cyprus and the European Union stressed the importance of clean water and sanitation for all, and of an integrated and basin-level water governance, linking water management with land-use, agriculture, energy and urban planning. Transboundary cooperation and data sharing were repeatedly identified as key enablers, notably by countries sharing river basins, to mitigate risks and prevent potential tensions.

8. Energy transitions were identified as a strong component of sustainable development, and closely linked to climate action, economic resilience and social inclusion. While progress in renewable energy deployment and energy efficiency was acknowledged, many delegations noted that trajectories remained insufficient and uneven. Countries such as Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova highlighted efforts to expand renewable energy and improve energy efficiency, including energy-efficient urban development and infrastructure, while also drawing attention to the challenges posed by energy security concerns, price volatility and infrastructure constraints.

9. Several interventions emphasized that just and inclusive energy transitions required a balanced mix of measures, combining clean energy investments with social safeguards and support for vulnerable households. International partnerships, investment mobilisation and technology cooperation were widely discussed as essential means to accelerate progress across the region. Ukraine reported large-scale destruction of energy infrastructure, along with water, transport and urban infrastructure as a result of the war, with direct implications for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

10. Innovation and resilient infrastructure were identified as cross-cutting enablers of progress across multiple SDGs. A number of countries, including Czechia, Poland, and Serbia highlighted the growing role of digitalization, data-driven policymaking and innovation ecosystems in enhancing productivity and service delivery. Several delegations, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Spain, stressed that investments in skills, research and development were needed to ensure that digital and green transitions supported inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Portugal highlighted that innovation and equity must be pursued as mutually reinforcing objectives. Infrastructure resilience was closely linked to the capacity to resist to climate-related hazards, economic shocks and, in some cases, conflict.

11. Cities and local communities were identified as critical arenas for implementing the 2030 Agenda, given that a large share of SDG targets depend on effective local action. Countries including the United Kingdom emphasized the role of cities in addressing housing, air pollution, sustainable mobility and climate resilience. Delegations referred to sustainable mobility and energy-efficient buildings as priorities for reducing emissions and improving quality of life. Romania stressed the need to strengthen coordination between national and local levels of government, while other delegations underlined the importance of community participation to ensure inclusive urban development. Overall, participants agreed that

coherent national frameworks must enable local governments to act as drivers of innovation and resilience.

12. Across all thematic areas, partnerships were consistently identified as indispensable for accelerating progress on the SDGs. Several countries referred to voluntary national and local reviews as tools for assessing progress, strengthening accountability and promoting policy coherence for sustainable development. Countries from the region, including Estonia, Germany, Italy, and North Macedonia, highlighted the benefits of inclusive review processes that actively engage youth, civil society and local authorities.

13. Furthermore, reliable, comparable and disaggregated data were highlighted as essential for informed decision-making and effective monitoring. Some delegations stressed the importance of strengthening national statistical systems, while others referred to the role of regional and international cooperation in supporting data harmonization and capacity-building. Delegations emphasized that closing financing gaps required better alignment of public and private investment with SDG priorities, as well as enabling environments for sustainable finance and innovation.

14. Additionally, regional and subregional cooperation was highlighted as essential. ECE was recognized as a key platform for fostering regional dialogue, enabling peer learning, and facilitating the exchange of experiences in areas related to sustainability.

15. Reporting back from the civil society forum, representatives from the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism for the ECE region (ECE-RCEM) stressed that wars and militarization are undermining sustainable development through environmental destruction, civilian suffering, displacement, and diversion of public resources. Ongoing conflicts are fuelling pollution, infrastructure collapse, food insecurity, and long-term social trauma. Democratic backsliding, reductions in cross-border cooperation and the shrinking of civic space further weakened SDG implementation. The statement called for human-rights-based, inclusive approaches to water, energy, infrastructure, housing, and digital governance, grounded in equity, accountability, and social dialogue, and urged member States to show political courage to protect civic space and address inequalities.

16. Reporting from the youth consultation, a youth representative highlighted a persistent gap between SDG commitments and lived realities, with youth participation remaining largely symbolic. Young people raised concerns across all SDGs under review: unequal access to water and sanitation; energy poverty and unjust energy transitions; education systems disconnected from labour market needs; underfunded youth innovation; unaffordable housing and exclusionary cities; and weak, non-transparent partnerships. The statement called for meaningful youth inclusion in decision making, sustained funding, ethical partnerships, and recognition of young people as equal partners in shaping sustainable development.

17. A statement from the Swiss Bankers Association identified financing at the necessary scale as one of the key challenges for sustainable development. Sustainable finance was framed as better capital allocation, recognizing climate change and biodiversity loss as material financial risks. The intervention identified four priorities: long-term policy certainty; smart, interoperable regulation to avoid fragmentation; strategic use of public finance to de-risk and mobilize private capital; and a strong pipeline of real-economy investment projects. The message to policymakers was that credibility, clarity, and consistency will enable finance to deliver impact at scale.

18. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean emphasized the critical role of parliamentarians in accelerating delivery of the SDGs. IOM stressed that migration is a key driver of sustainable development, supporting economic growth, innovation, demographic resilience, and green transitions.

19. Several delegations (Estonia, European Union, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, United Kingdom) referred to the war against Ukraine and its adverse consequences for the region and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Russian Federation called for a non-politicized approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The European Union called for the cessation of disinformation campaigns in international forums.

Outcomes of the peer learning round tables

Goal 6

Advancing SDG 6 in the UNECE Region: Achievements, Opportunities and Future Pathways – On the Road to the 2026 UN Water Conference

20. The round table, which also served as a preparatory event for the ECE region for the 2026 UN Water Conference (United Arab Emirates, 2-4 December 2026), highlighted that while significant progress has been achieved in the ECE region on SDG 6, it will be urgent to accelerate implementation in the face of persistent and evolving water challenges. Water-related risks are no longer future concerns but a present reality shaping economic, political and social decisions.

21. Globally, the pan-European region stands as one of the most advanced regions on SDG 6 and has many good practice examples to share. 93% of the population drinks safely managed water, against 74% globally (SDG indicator 6.1.1), and the average value of SDG indicator 6.5.2 – measuring transboundary cooperation – in the region is 70%, above the global average of 59%.

22. However, progress remains uneven, with disparities between and within countries. Challenges include gaps in water supply and sanitation access for vulnerable groups, the need to improve water quality through wastewater treatment, and reducing freshwater withdrawals in some areas.

23. Progress in services and infrastructure is strong; however, the underlying water resource base is under increasing pressure. This highlights the need to move beyond a focus on infrastructure alone, and to place greater emphasis on protecting water quality, ecosystems and groundwater resources. Ecosystem degradation, pollution (including PFAS or microplastics), coupled with climate impacts, threaten resilience and increase treatment costs and healthcare expenditures.

24. The next phase of SDG 6 implementation must better connect service delivery with resource management, resilience and sustainability. This should include scaling-up nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration, such as in the Rhine and Torne basins, and integrated approaches linking water with other sectors.

25. Water needs to be treated as a cross-cutting enabler across the 2030 Agenda, linked to climate, biodiversity, food, health, and energy, as well as to conflict prevention as highlighted by a number of delegations. However, fragmentation persists, requiring greater coherence across sectors and countries.

26. Participants highlighted tools supporting cross-sectoral coordination. The ECE-WHO/Europe Protocol on Water and Health supports countries in the region to implement integrated approaches connecting water, health and environment through target setting, peer exchange and international cooperation. The Protocol faces an increased momentum in Central Asia, following recent accessions by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Its tools such as the Equitable Access Score-card have helped countries such as Kazakhstan and Montenegro to identify population groups lacking access to safely managed water and sanitation. The Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem Nexus serves as a practical tool, with examples from Central Asia showing its value in reconciling water uses towards sustainable solutions.

27. Transboundary cooperation was highlighted as essential and achievable through practical approaches such as joint arrangements and institutions, shared monitoring, harmonized data, joint assessments, and basin planning. The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) as a unique, and now global, legal and intergovernmental framework has greatly accelerated transboundary cooperation, through exchange of experience, capacity-building and tools such as on source-to-sea management or facilitating agreements. Recent examples of progress include the transboundary agreements signed between France and Switzerland on the Rhone and Lake Geneva in 2025. Strong basin organizations such as the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River are greatly supporting riparian countries in data-sharing, climate change adaptation and basin planning. Incremental, technical

cooperation can build trust even in complex contexts as shown through the example of an innovative Memorandum of understanding between Armenia and Georgia on monitoring and data. Overall, durable cooperation depends on political support, data-sharing, institutions and well communicated shared benefits.

28. Inclusive and participatory approaches were emphasized as critical in water governance. Engaging communities, civil society and youth can improve water management, service delivery and basin planning. Examples included community-based disaster preparedness, early warning systems and basin-level public participation initiatives such as awareness campaigns and school programs in the Danube basin and beyond. Women and local actors were highlighted as playing a key role in water management and crisis response. Youth highlighted the need for including their voice in decision-making processes. The Interreg Euro-MED Natural Heritage Mission was referred to as a model for localizing SDG 6 through transboundary cooperation and innovative governance in the Mediterranean.

29. Climate change is a major challenge for water management, due to increasing floods, droughts and other impacts. Strengthening resilience requires integrated water resources management and adaptive approaches, such as flexible provisions in basin agreements (example of the Albufeira Convention), alongside improving water use efficiency, reducing water losses, wastewater reuse and ecosystem restoration. Mainstreaming water into Rio Conventions and climate policies was highlighted as a priority.

30. Insufficient financing remains a critical constraint. Participants highlighted the need to mobilize public and private finance, strengthen enabling environments for investment, explore innovative finance mechanisms, develop pipelines of bankable projects and align governance, data and investment frameworks.

31. Looking ahead, the 2026 United Nations Water Conference was considered as a key opportunity to accelerate action. Regional priorities to carry forward to the Conference include scaling up implementation, enhancing capacity and valuing water, strengthening cooperation, enhancing financing, promoting integrated approaches and inclusive governance.

32. The session concluded with a strong recognition that achieving SDG 6 requires sustained political commitment, including by promoting accessions to the Water Convention and Protocol on Water and Health, strengthened sustainable partnerships and coordinated action across sectors and borders. Strengthening regular political processes and maintaining momentum beyond key events, as well as keeping water high on the political agenda before and beyond 2030, will be essential to ensure that commitments translate into implementation on the ground.

Goal 7

Successes and Lessons Learned on Advancing Resilient and Sustainable Energy Systems in the ECE Region

33. The discussion in the round table took stock of regional progress towards achievement of Goal 7, highlighting that, since 2000, ECE has reached nearly universal access to electricity; increased the share of renewables in the energy mix; and nearly halved the average energy intensity level of primary energy.

34. However, many achievements mask underlying challenges:

(a) Energy systems face reliability, affordability, and stability pressures. Recent disruptions have exposed vulnerabilities in grid infrastructure, particularly as electricity demand continues to grow. Increasing electrification, coupled with expansion of digital technologies and data-intensive applications, is placing additional strain on systems that were not designed for such loads.

(b) Structural gaps exist between policy ambition and actual energy transformation. Renewable energy progress remains uneven and insufficient, and its share in energy mixes often remains at or only slightly above 10% – far below levels required to significantly reduce

the energy sector carbon footprint. 49 member States have committed to reducing methane, yet implementation remains inconsistent.

(c) One of the principal barriers to accelerating the energy transition, especially in UNECE programme countries, is the limited availability of renewable energy storage capacities and supporting infrastructure.

(d) Reductions in energy intensity, while notable, are not sufficient to meet the 2030 targets. Accelerating energy efficiency must be the primary driver of progress toward Goal 7 as it is the most immediate, cost-effective, and scalable intervention delivering reductions in energy demand, lowering system costs, and improving resilience.

35. Energy efficiency in buildings was identified as one of the most critical and actionable priorities. Buildings account for approximately 40-45% of total energy consumption, largely driven by heating and cooling needs, making the sector a central focus for reducing overall energy demand. Investments in insulation, retrofitting, and efficient heating systems can yield rapid and measurable benefits, including reduced energy costs, improved comfort, and lower emissions alongside health benefits. However, progress is constrained by fragmented ownership structures, high upfront costs, and limited access to financing.

36. Policy development has accelerated in recent years. More than 50 by-laws and regulatory measures have been adopted by countries in the region related to energy efficiency, eco-design, and system standards, demonstrating strong political commitment. Participants, however, stressed that implementation is lagging. Regulatory frameworks are often not matched by enforcement capacity, institutional coordination, or technical expertise, creating a gap between formal adoption and impact on the ground. Moreover, speakers highlighted the need for human rights, equality, and resilience in achieving Goal 7.

37. Institutional capacity constraints remain a recurring challenge, as effective implementation requires engineering, planning, auditing, and administrative skills that are lacking in many countries, particularly subnationally where implementation often occurs. Participants underscored that without sustained investment in human capital, well-designed policies cannot deliver intended results.

38. Financing remains a major barrier for scaling clean energy solutions. Initial investment requirements for energy efficiency measures or renewable energy technologies, although cost-effective over time, were highlighted as oftentimes prohibitive for households, businesses, and public authorities. Existing funding mechanisms are insufficient to support large-scale deployment. There is a clear need for innovative financial instruments, including blended finance, guarantees, de-risking mechanisms, revolving funds, and stronger public-private partnerships to mobilize capital at scale.

39. Energy pricing and subsidy structures also influence outcomes. In some contexts, low energy prices reduce incentives to invest in efficiency improvements and in renewable energy development. Reforming pricing mechanisms, while ensuring protection for vulnerable groups, is essential to send appropriate economic signals for investment and behavioural change.

40. Digitalization was identified as a critical enabler of more efficient and resilient energy systems. Advanced metering infrastructure enabling real-time monitoring, and data-driven management tools, can optimize energy consumption and improve system performance. However, large portions of energy use remain unmonitored, particularly in heating and transport. Expanding digital infrastructure and improving data availability are necessary to unlock the full optimization potential.

41. Regional cooperation and interconnection were highlighted as critical for system resilience and systemic efficiency. Some countries reported having over 20 cross-border energy interconnections, enabling better load balancing, integration of renewable energy, and enhanced energy security. Expanding and modernizing these networks will be essential as systems increase in complexity and interdependency.

42. Participants highlighted the importance of integrating circular economy principles and nexus-oriented approaches into energy systems. Responsible use of resources, recycling of materials, and sustainable design can reduce environmental impacts while improving supply chains and energy system sustainability. This is particularly relevant in the context of

renewable energy technologies, which depend on critical energy transition materials. Renewable energy technologies rely on critical minerals, whose impacts require rights-based and well-governed supply chains.

43. Despite high levels of access, energy poverty remains a significant concern. Many households continue to face energy affordability challenges, particularly in relation to maintaining thermal comfort. Energy efficiency was identified as a key tool to address this challenge by reducing demand and lowering energy costs but must be complemented by targeted social policies to support populations during the transition.

44. Participants underscored the need to move from siloed approaches to integrated, system-wide approaches that strengthen systems across multiple dimensions. Energy efficiency, renewable energy, grid modernization, digitalization, and social policies must be pursued in a coordinated manner, also in coordination with other sectors. Climate risks and interdependencies must be integrated into infrastructure planning upfront. Fragmented or isolated interventions are insufficient to achieve the required scale of transformation.

45. The transition must also be flexible and context-specific as resource availability, economic structure, and institutional capacity varies by country. While there is no universal pathway, all approaches must prioritize efficiency as the foundation for sustainable energy systems.

46. The discussion concluded that while measurable progress has been achieved, the current trends are not sufficient to meet the Goal 7 targets and must be accelerated.

Goal 9

Smart Procurement, Smart Mobility: Catalysing Innovation for Resilient Infrastructure

47. In part 1 of the round table, participants discussed the role of Innovation-enhancing Procurement (IEP) and Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) as strategic levers for advancing sustainable infrastructure, competitiveness and resilience across the ECE region. Speakers emphasized that transforming procurement from a routine administrative function into a catalyst for innovation can shift the needle for delivering on Goal 9.

48. Specifically, governments can shape markets not only through regulation and incentives, but also as a demand-side driver through public purchasing. Procurement can foster innovation, support building resilient infrastructure and promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization.

49. IEP was highlighted as a smart, new-generation policy instrument that can benefit both public and private stakeholders. Selected countries are spearheading its use, thus also sparking growing interest across the ECE region. At the same time, many countries still rely on traditional procurement approaches, forgoing the opportunities for experimentation and the transformative outcomes that are needed to address sustainable development challenges. Turning IEP from a niche into a wide-spread policy tool will require a cultural shift in public administration, in addition to regulatory reforms.

50. The roundtable also addressed PPPs. When consciously managed across the different stages of the project lifecycle, PPPs offer a framework for delivering much-needed innovation and sustainability objectives for infrastructure projects. When environmental, social and innovation criteria are incorporated from the outset, PPPs can help attract private finance while also spurring innovation, managing risks and delivering resilient infrastructure outcomes. Country examples from across the ECE region illustrated these dynamics in practice.

51. Normative tools developed by ECE were recognized as key enablers, supporting governments in their ambition to use demand-side drivers for the SDGs transition. The ECE Transformative Innovation Charter provides a shared framework for positioning procurement as a strategic instrument for innovation. The ECE Guidelines on Green and Sustainable PPP Procurement and the Public-Private Partnerships and Infrastructure Evaluation and Rating System (PIERS) methodology offer practical guidance for integrating sustainability and

resilience into PPP processes. Participants noted that these tools bring clarity, support policy coherence and help governments navigate complex innovation and infrastructure agendas.

52. Technical assistance, peer learning and the sharing of experience were repeatedly emphasized as essential. Countries highlighted the value of tailored guidance to support mindset shifts, enable policy experimentation and foster cross-government collaboration. Several speakers stressed that particularly smaller economies benefit from structured support to translate innovative approaches into practice and scale successful solutions.

53. Participants agreed that IEP and well-designed PPPs hold significant potential to accelerate progress toward Goal 9. The session underscored a shared commitment to advancing transformative innovation across the region and to leveraging ECE normative tools and platforms to support this effort.

54. Part 2 of the round table focused on the role of Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) and automation in strengthening resilient, inclusive and competitive transport infrastructure across the ECE region. Participants emphasized that while technological innovation is advancing rapidly, successful deployment at scale depends on effective governance, and adoption and alignment with social, environmental and economic priorities supported by international harmonization.

55. The role of ECE as a global platform for regulatory cooperation was highlighted as critical for avoiding fragmentation and enabling the safe deployment of automated transport systems. ECE regulatory bodies and expert groups support the harmonization of vehicle regulations across regions, providing legal certainty, facilitating cross-border operability and strengthening public trust.

56. Participants noted that regulatory approaches must remain flexible, technology-neutral and outcome-oriented. Rather than prescribing detailed technical specifications, global rules should define safety principles, depending on operational boundaries and roles and responsibilities, allowing innovation to evolve while maintaining high safety standards. Harmonization was considered particularly important given the cross-border nature of mobility services and vehicle markets.

57. Practical examples from public transport demonstrated the potential of automation to improve service quality and efficiency. Pilot experiences showed how on-demand shared mobility services using automated minibuses complement underutilized fixed routes in peri-urban areas. Automation enables new operating models by reallocating human roles from driving to supervision, while improving accessibility and user experience.

58. The discussion emphasized that public transport operators deliver services rather than technology. Automation and artificial intelligence should therefore be deployed as enablers to enhance accessibility, reliability and affordability, including for persons with reduced mobility and older persons. Intelligent systems can support predictive demand management, efficient routing and better integration of different transport modes.

59. Testing and validation were identified as essential for resilient infrastructure development. Large-scale testing environments and pilots allow governments and operators to assess vehicle performance and interactions with infrastructure and environmental conditions. Data-driven evaluation supports regulatory and investment decisions.

60. Stakeholders highlighted the need to align transport automation with broader sustainability goals. According to the policies already in place, electrification and automation must be coordinated with clean energy transitions to avoid shifting emissions upstream. Inclusive design was also emphasized, with participants underscoring the importance of embedding accessibility requirements from the outset and involving users, including persons with disabilities, older persons and young people, in system design and testing. Public transport authorities were considered well placed to transfer their long-standing experience in this field to automated mobility.

61. In conclusion, participants agreed that intelligent transport systems and adequate transport infrastructure will be central to future mobility. Achieving their full contribution to Goal 9 requires international cooperation, harmonized regulation, robust testing frameworks, skills development and a clear focus on inclusion, affordability and environmental sustainability, ensuring that innovation leaves no one behind.

Goal 11

Implementation and Localization: Progress, Challenges and Enablers

62. Progress has been made in advancing SDG 11. Countries and cities have strengthened policy alignment, enhanced urban data systems, and increased political commitment, supported by growing evidence from Voluntary National and Local Reviews (VNRs and VLRs) applying the Global Urban Monitoring Frameworks aligned with the New Urban Agenda.

63. However, a persistent gap remains between policy design and implementation at scale. While data availability has improved, its use - especially forward-looking and disaggregated data - remains insufficiently integrated into planning and investment systems.

64. At the same time, cities and communities face intensifying pressures from climate change, demographic shifts, migration, inequality, protracted crises, and geopolitical instability, further complicating implementation efforts.

65. The lack of integrated, multi-sectoral and multi-level governance is a recurring challenge. Moving from isolated pilots to systemic and scalable approaches requires stronger alignment between policy frameworks, financing mechanisms, and delivery systems, supported by coordinated action across all levels of government.

66. Financing emerged as a central issue. Participants emphasized the importance of blended finance models, combining public investment, concessional funding, loans, grants, and private capital, alongside effective risk-sharing arrangements. Predictable, long-term strategies are essential to ensure sustained investment and the continued operation of infrastructure and services. Other participants stressed that housing is still considered as a financial asset and not as a right.

67. Access to adequate and affordable housing remains a critical structural challenge across the region. Affordability constraints and limited access for vulnerable groups are exacerbated by factors such as tourism pressures, ageing housing stock, disasters, and speculative markets. These challenges were reaffirmed at the 2025 ECE Housing Ministerial meeting, with commitments adopted to address them regionwide.

68. Contributions from city representatives, including through the UN Forum of Mayors, highlighted the growing role of cities in multilateral processes and local implementation. While cities are at the frontline, they often face constraints in fiscal space, authority, and capacity. Strengthening decentralization, improving access to resources, and ensuring that local priorities are reflected in national decision-making were identified as critical conditions for success, alongside better alignment across governance levels to ensure coherence and trust.

69. Several concrete approaches were presented to operationalize Goal 11. These included polycentric regional development supported by spatial planning tools; the use of VLRs to strengthen evidence, monitoring, and accountability; the application of demographic and mobility data to inform responses to ageing, migration, and urban growth; and integrated metropolitan planning enabling coordinated investments and improved resilience.

70. Sustainable urban mobility and road safety was identified as a key enabler of Goal 11. The discussion's key takeaways included the following:

(a) Integrated land-use and transport planning, combined with shared governance and financing frameworks, are essential to promote compact, people-centred cities prioritizing walking, cycling, and public transport, alongside road safety improvements and inclusive design. Examples include binding urban growth agreements aligning policy, responsibilities, and financing across government levels;

(b) Inclusive mobility and safe systems approaches received strong attention. Child- and youth-friendly mobility initiatives highlighted safe infrastructure, low speeds, behaviour change, and road safety education, including activities under the ECE-WHO/Europe Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP). Age-friendly systems emphasized life-course approaches, addressing inequality, accessibility, safety, and

social participation. Both underscore the importance of disaggregated data by age, gender, income, and disability to better understand needs and ensure equity;

(c) User-centred and inclusive planning for vulnerable groups, in particular older people, and persons with disabilities, showed that accessibility barriers stem mainly from fragmented systems and inadequate provisions rather than proximity alone. Integrated planning across transport modes, public space and digital tools is essential for safe, independent mobility, supported by community engagement and flexible adaptation;

(d) Data-driven mobility systems, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms can optimize transport flows, reduce congestion, and improve service efficiency and road safety. However, these must be aligned with user needs, and support – not replace – inclusive, intermodal public transport. Emerging solutions such as automated buses and smart mobility hubs were noted;

(e) Circular economy approaches offer pathways to more resilient cities through local energy generation, sustainable infrastructure and resource efficiency. Integrating energy, mobility, and land use can generate financial savings, environmental benefits, and social value, supported by stronger local autonomy;

(f) Civil society emphasized that sustainable mobility must go beyond technical solutions and be grounded in participatory governance. Co-design, accountability mechanisms, and the use of disaggregated and lived experience data are essential to address structural inequalities and ensure that policies reflect real needs. Climate and emission reduction strategies must be paired with affordability protections to avoid displacing burdens onto the most vulnerable;

(g) The youth intervention highlighted the gap between policy frameworks and lived realities, particularly regarding unsafe mobility, long commutes, housing pressures and air pollution in Central Asia. It called for meaningful inclusion in decision-making, capacity-building to engage with urban governance, and stronger action to address structural barriers – including personal safety, particularly for young women and minorities – that limit access to safe, affordable and sustainable urban environments.

71. Across discussions, a clear message emerged: accelerating Goal 11 requires moving from fragmented interventions to integrated systems approaches. This includes strengthening multi-level governance, predictable and blended financing, empowered local authorities, inclusive participation, and effective use of data and innovation in service of people-centred outcomes. Achieving sustainable, inclusive, safe and resilient cities and communities depend on aligning evidence, policy, investment and implementation through policy coherence for sustainable development and sustained partnerships. The outcomes of these discussions will inform contributions to the World Urban Forum (WUF13) in Baku and the “Baku Call to Action,” advancing the transition from good practices to system-wide transformation.

Goal 17

Partnerships for Human-Centric Inclusive Digital Transformation

72. The round table underscored the transformative role of digitalization as a key enabler for achieving the SDGs, while recognizing that its impact depends on how effectively partnerships are structured, governed and aligned with broader development priorities. Digital transformation was consistently framed as both an opportunity and a challenge, requiring coordinated action across sectors and levels of governance.

73. A central message was the need to build trusted, interoperable, inclusive, and accountable digital partnerships. Multistakeholder collaboration that convenes governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, NGOs, academia and youth, was recognized as essential to avoid fragmentation and duplication, and to ensure that digital initiatives deliver tangible public value. Strong partnerships rely on trust, clearly defined roles and shared responsibility, as well as alignment with human rights, gender equality and the public interest.

74. Partnerships were recognized as a key mechanism for scaling innovation and sharing knowledge. The Partner2Connect initiative, collaborative platforms, peer learning and knowledge hubs can help mobilize resources, disseminate best practices,

reduce duplication and accelerate progress, provided they are aligned with national priorities and focused on impact.

75. Interoperability is a critical foundation for effective digital transformation. This includes not only technical interoperability between systems, but also institutional coordination across government entities. Integrated platforms, secure data exchange and reusable digital public infrastructure were highlighted as practical ways to improve efficiency, reduce administrative burdens and enable more human-centric public services.

76. The importance of investing in data, capacity building and governance for sustainable digital transformation was highlighted. Reliable, timely and disaggregated data is essential for informed decision-making and for tracking progress on the SDGs. However, growing reliance on alternative and user-driven data sources requires stronger safeguards to ensure data quality, privacy and security.

77. Effective governance frameworks are key to building trust and driving growth. Legal and regulatory systems need to be adaptable and keep pace with rapid technological developments, particularly in areas such as data protection, cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence (AI). At the same time, governance approaches should remain flexible enough to support innovation, including through pilot initiatives and iterative learning.

78. Human capacity was repeatedly highlighted as a decisive factor. Digital transformation does not only depend on stable and resilient infrastructure and tools, but also on people's ability to use them. This calls for sustained investment in digital skills, education and training across all levels of society, including within public administrations.

79. Another important point was the need to connect short-term initiatives with long-term strategies. Digital projects are most effective when they are embedded within coherent national frameworks, with clear objectives, measurable outcomes and strong coordination across institutions. A shift away from isolated pilot projects towards systemic, long-term approaches was widely encouraged.

80. The discussions emphasized the importance of ensuring that digital transformation is human-centred, equitable and future-oriented. Technologies, including AI, should serve people, strengthen democratic values and improve everyday life. Trust, transparency and accountability were seen as essential conditions for public acceptance and meaningful use of digital services.

81. While digitalization creates significant opportunities for innovation, efficiency and resilience, it also carries the risk of deepening existing inequalities. Persistent gender, age, rural, disability and income digital divides remain a major concern. Ensuring equitable access to infrastructure, services and skills is critical to avoid leaving parts of society behind.

82. The importance of inclusion was further reinforced through discussions on gender equality, youth engagement and accessibility. Digital transformation should be designed in a way that actively includes women, persons with disabilities, rural communities and other underrepresented groups, ensuring that their needs and perspectives are reflected from the outset.

83. Digital technologies were recognized as powerful tools for strengthening not only public administration and agriculture, but also resilience and crisis response. Real-time data, predictive analytics and digital platforms can support early warning systems, improve emergency coordination and ensure continuity of public services in the face of climate-related and other shocks.

84. At the same time, the environmental footprint of digital technologies is an emerging issue that requires greater attention. The growing energy demands of data centres and AI systems highlight the need to align digital transformation with climate and sustainability objectives.

85. Inclusive digital infrastructure and meaningful connectivity remain fundamental challenges. Expanding access to the internet and digital services must go hand in hand with affordability, accessibility and digital literacy, particularly in underserved and rural areas.

86. Youth stressed that digital and AI solutions can strengthen resilience and innovation, but only if they are inclusive, accessible and co-created with young people. Young people highlighted the importance of digital skills, meaningful participation and trust, while also raising concerns about unequal access, data privacy and the environmental impact of digital technologies.

87. Civil society stressed that digital transformation is not neutral and, without deliberate safeguards, can reinforce exclusion and inequality. Concerns were raised about the concentration of power in digital ecosystems, the risks of data-privacy and data misuse and the potential for technologies to outpace regulatory frameworks. There was a strong call for inclusive governance, transparency, accountability and the protection of human rights, as well as greater support for digital literacy and civic participation.

88. Finally, there was a call to strengthen alignment between national efforts and global processes related to digital transformation. Building on existing initiatives such as the World Summit on the Information Society, the Global Digital Compact and ongoing work on AI can help ensure coherence and amplify the contribution of digital technologies to the achievement of the SDGs and the broader UN agenda, including the Pact for the Future. The UN Digital Transformation Group for Europe and Central Asia was called upon to continue effective coordination amongst the UN system stakeholders to support inclusive and human-centred digital transformation across the region.

C. Plenary session

Driving Sustainable Futures: Integrated and Innovative Solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals

89. At the plenary session, a panel discussion on Beyond GDP entitled “Valuing What Counts – Rethinking Progress in the ECE Region in an Age of Crises” was held. It examined the growing consensus that traditional economic indicators, particularly Gross Domestic Product (GDP), are insufficient to capture societal progress and well-being. While GDP remains a useful measure of economic activity, it was emphasized that it does not adequately reflect broader dimensions of development such as social equity, environmental sustainability, human rights, and intergenerational justice. The discussion reinforced that “Beyond GDP” is not a purely technical exercise, but a fundamentally political process that shapes policy priorities, resource allocation, public narratives, and decision-making frameworks.

90. Participants underlined that substantial analytical work and practical experience on measuring well-being beyond GDP already exist. International statistical communities, research institutions, and governments have developed numerous frameworks and indicators covering health, education, inequality, environmental quality, and subjective well-being. However, the challenge is not a lack of metrics but their fragmentation and lack of scale. There was broad agreement on the need to converge toward a coherent, manageable, and policy-relevant set of indicators that can complement GDP while remaining grounded in existing SDG frameworks, human rights and national statistical capacities. Dashboards, measures of subjective life satisfaction and monetary aggregates could be considered in this regard. However, capturing subjective well-being and using it to create certain monetary aggregates may require the use of expensive surveys.

91. A central theme was the concept of inclusive and sustainable well-being, encompassing both present and future dimensions. Emphasis was placed on intergenerational equity as a core principle of sustainable development, requiring societies to assess whether current policies enhance well-being today without undermining the prospects of future generations. This perspective highlights the importance of resilience, sustainability, and long-term investment in people and planet, rather than short-term output growth alone.

92. The panel also discussed the institutional implications of moving beyond GDP. National statistical systems were identified as critical enablers but face capacity, resource, and methodological challenges, particularly when measuring non-market activities, unpaid work, inequality, environmental degradation, and subjective well-being. Strengthening trust in data through independence, transparency, and comparability was highlighted as essential.

The importance of innovation in data sources, including administrative data, surveys, and participatory approaches, was emphasized alongside the continued need for robust public institutions.

93. Considerable attention was given to how beyond GDP metrics can meaningfully influence policymaking, such as in Spain. Participants stressed that indicators only matter if they shape decisions related to political priorities, national strategies, budgeting, legislation, and accountability. Examples of integrating well-being considerations into budgetary processes or legal frameworks demonstrated that change is possible when political commitment aligns with measurement reform. Transboundary impacts and global spillover effects would also need to be taken into account. Regional and subregional cooperation was considered useful to develop measurement and policy frameworks, e.g. in South-Eastern Europe, in addition to global initiatives such as the Beyond GDP Global Alliance.

94. The discussion also highlighted the importance of public engagement and narrative change. Progress was framed not only as a technical measurement issue but as a societal conversation about values, priorities, and the purpose of economic activity. Participation by youth, civil society, local authorities, and other stakeholders was seen as essential to ensure legitimacy, inclusiveness, and public ownership of new frameworks.
