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Summary of the work of the Economic Commission for Europe, 2020–2021

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 2020–2021.



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Summary

The present report contains highlights of the work of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in the period 2020–2021. Activities during that period have been marked by the exceptional situation created by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has generated new demands and raised operational challenges. The preservation of connectivity and the use of digital solutions to mitigate the impact of the crisis became major priorities. Looking beyond the emergency, a growing interest in resilience and risk reduction has taken shape, informing various work strains. The response to the COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to build more solid and sustainable foundations for development in the region. In the report, there is a particular emphasis on the work on sustainable mobility and smart connectivity, which has been at the forefront of the ECE response to the immediate needs of member States arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to accelerated recovery, climate action, economic dynamism and improved environmental and health outcomes.

I. Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic created pressing challenges that radically changed the policy focus in the region. The immediate priorities were to improve the health situation and address the most urgent socioeconomic implications. ECE reoriented its work to assist its member States in those difficult circumstances, in line with existing mandates. The preservation of connectivity and the use of digital solutions became major concerns. Supporting those who had been more severely affected by the crisis was also an important focus of attention. New data demands emerged at a time when data collection itself was disrupted.

2. Alongside the efforts to address the emergency, a growing interest in resilience and risk reduction has developed. That has been reflected across ECE activities, in particular with respect to trade and the environment. The COVID-19 crisis is also an urban crisis, which has prompted renewed work on cities, both to enable them to respond to current needs and to enhance their ability to withstand future shocks.

3. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to build more solid and sustainable foundations for development in the region. The alignment of the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, so that the recovery is sustainable and resilient, was the main theme of the 2021 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE region. ECE has much to offer to ensure such an alignment: from supporting nature-based solutions and preserving the health of ecosystems to transforming mobility, decarbonizing energy systems and promoting the circular economy. ECE normative outputs can make a critical contribution in all of these areas, while its capacity-building activities assist countries in bridging implementation gaps.

4. The COVID-19 crisis also brought changes in working methods to cope with the new circumstances. Physical meetings and workshops were replaced by hybrid and online meetings and adapted to the new formats in terms of content, preparation and duration. Operational uncertainty has become an additional challenge to ECE work. Technological solutions have been exploited to better assist member States in this new environment.

II. Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region

5. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the ECE region. Although there are differences between countries, the region displays high levels of urbanization, population density and mobility. These features favoured COVID-19 contagion, but also increased the difficulty and economic cost of implementing social distancing measures. Closure of borders and mobility restrictions had a severe impact on transport and trade, compounding the economic malaise and affecting the delivery of critical supplies.

6. Before the health emergency unfolded, the picture of advances towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals was already mixed. In 2021, for the second time, ECE prepared a report to assess the progress on achieving the Goals, based on data that did not yet include the COVID-19 period. If past trends had held, the region would have achieved only 23 targets by 2030. Progress on 57 targets should accelerate. For 9 targets, trends are negative and must be reversed. For 80 targets, almost half of the total, there is no sufficient national data to track change over time. Significant progress is necessary therefore, not only to meet the targets but also to

improve data availability, including in countries with well-developed statistical systems.

7. The crisis has brought about setbacks on Sustainable Development Goal implementation and created new challenges, including at the operational level. However, the renewed policy momentum and the launching of recovery plans have also fostered opportunities to reassess existing practices and to provide new impetus on the path to sustainable development.

8. The work of ECE has been aimed at supporting its member States in addressing the emergency needs arising from the COVID-19 crisis while seeking to provide more solid and sustainable foundations for the recovery. Its action framework for responses to the COVID-19 crisis includes three main pillars:

(a) Facilitating connectivity, including by enhanced cooperation and implementation of a regulatory framework for border crossings and the use of digital tools in trade and transport (see section IV below in particular);

(b) Addressing transboundary and other risks through the use of ECE multilateral agreements, standards and statistical frameworks for informed decision-making;

(c) Supporting 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 and the development of sustainable infrastructure.

9. The 2021 Sustainable Development Goals progress report found that much needed to be done, in particular in critical areas related to climate change and the environment, including the conservation of ecosystems, biodiversity, disaster resilience, waste generation and treatment and the sustainable use of natural resources. ECE is particularly active in these and related areas. Promoting the circular economy and sustainable use of natural resources in the ECE region was the main theme of the sixty-ninth session of the ECE (held on 20 and 21 April 2021), which gave further impetus to that work, thus contributing to the acceleration of progress in the region.

10. The COVID-19 crisis has spurred a reflection on how the current pandemic will influence environmental policy. ECE sought to assist countries in developing policy packages that increase resilience and support a green economic recovery. A particular point of attention has been the preparation of new principles on green and healthy sustainable transport, taking stock of experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic.

11. The COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on the need for continuous water supply and improved hygiene practices to reduce the transmission of the virus, especially considering the need for frequent handwashing. Yet 31 million people in the pan-European region do not have access to basic sanitation, and 48 million people do not have piped water at home.

12. Within that context, ECE actively promotes the tools of the Protocol on Water and Health (jointly serviced with the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe), aimed at helping countries to enhance equitable access to water and sanitation. The equitable access scorecard, an analytical tool developed under the Protocol, is used to assess equity in existing water and sanitation public policies and actions to be taken. ECE has also explored how the Protocol's tools can be used to align with and apply regional water legislation such as the newly adopted European Union Drinking Water Directive 2020/2184, which has a clear focus on equity.

13. The air quality in Europe continues to improve, although there are significant differences between countries. Emissions of air pollutants remain on a downward trend, according to the most recent data of the European Environment Agency,

supported by binding emission reduction targets under the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and the Protocol to Abate Acidification, Eutrophication and Ground-level Ozone (Gothenburg Protocol) thereto, which have been transposed into European Union legislation. In 2020, parties to the amended Gothenburg Protocol – a unique and binding instrument that covers all the major air pollutants and their groups – initiated a review process to further strengthen its effectiveness.

14. In support of the broad, regional approach needed to ensure clean air in the region as part of a green recovery from the crisis, ECE assisted Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova towards accession and full implementation of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and its key protocols.

15. Policy advice provided under the ECE Environmental Performance Reviews Programme supported countries' efforts to develop better policies in environmentally related fields while making an explicit link to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, the third Environmental Performance Review of Uzbekistan, launched in 2020, provides recommendations on greening the energy, agriculture, transport, housing, industry and health sectors. The review examined 64 Sustainable Development Goal targets related to the issues covered by the Review and helped the country to develop a road map of actions for implementing them. The Review of Romania, which will be published later in 2021, considered 52 Sustainable Development Goal targets.

16. Governments have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by adopting measures to combat the spread of the virus, which have often included restrictions on freedoms of assembly and movement. Public hearings have been cancelled, postponed or moved online. The move to virtual platforms and the use of information and communication technologies expands the space for civic engagement and has a role to play in promoting responsible and accountable governance. However, not all members of the public will have access to these technologies.

17. In such a situation, two treaties hosted by ECE – the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers – supported authorities in the implementation of these rights during the pandemic according to common standards. In view of these circumstances, the recommendations on electronic information tools have been updated and will be submitted to the seventh meeting of the parties to the Aarhus Convention for adoption.

18. ECE is contributing to the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration through two major initiatives: supporting countries in Eastern, South-East Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia to restore degraded landscapes; and working directly with cities to increase their canopy cover through the Trees in Cities Challenge. In 2020, ECE continued to assist countries in improving information about the status of, trends in and need for forest landscape restoration and in preparing pledges on forest landscape restoration. Pledges have been secured from 20 cities to plant almost 11 million new trees under the Trees in Cities Challenge.

19. Some parts of the ECE region are particularly vulnerable to climate change, biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystems. The eight countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, with 28.8 million hectares of existing forests and other wooded land, have made considerable efforts to address those challenges by developing national forest monitoring systems to advance sustainable forest management and restore degraded forest landscapes.

20. ECE has been working closely with them to support such efforts, including through country reports on the forest sector and forest resources. In particular, ECE has helped them to develop national criteria and indicators for sustainable forest

management, which are critical to facilitating communications among stakeholders and society at large.

21. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the importance of assessing potential risks and taking preventative action to avoid or reduce them. In this changing context, the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Espoo Convention) and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment have been recognized as having a role in a healthy and green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and in the prevention of future pandemics.

22. The Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment provides decision-makers with early warnings regarding unsustainable options and contributes to the reduction and management of environment and health risks. It facilitates the consideration of a wide range of impacts through a cohesive, integrated approach that goes beyond individual economic sectors. ECE continued to assist countries from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, in cooperation with other partners, to promote the implementation of the treaties and the completion of the related legislative reforms in the region.

23. The vulnerability of global raw materials supply chains has been exposed by COVID-19 disruptions. Countries have made progress on application of the United Nations Framework Classification for Resources and the development of the United Nations Resource Management System, which can help identify alternative production options covering both conventional and unconventional sources.

24. The appeal of the circular economy has increased as an approach that contributes to increase resilience. The United Nations Framework Classification for Resources can also facilitate resource recovery from materials otherwise considered as waste. Progress in the use of the Framework Classification in 2020 included the issuance of guidelines for application by Finland, and the mapping of critical raw materials for battery production by the European Commission to support the European Green Deal. The green transition will potentially be rather resource intensive. Technologies such as solar photovoltaics, batteries, electric vehicle motors, wind turbines and fuel cells require metals and minerals that face sustainability challenges.

25. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the need for readiness to deal with future crises and for enhancing resilience to shocks. Actions at the city level can make an important contribution to advance efforts in that direction, given that many sources of stress have an important urban dimension. ECE has participated in a global project that seeks to improve planning for more resilience in cities to better withstand shocks while supporting cities in their economic recovery.

26. Dealing with the needs of informal settlements is of particular importance when seeking to fulfil the promise of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. ECE has supported the development of a post COVID-19 recovery action plan for informal settlements for countries in the region and provided concrete recommendations for the upgrading of informal settlements in four pilot cities.

27. Building on the experiences of the 2019 Day of Cities, which gathered mayors from the European region, ECE convened in October 2020 its first ever forum of mayors. Its overall theme was “City action for a resilient future: strengthening local government preparedness and response to emergencies and the impact of disasters and climate change”. The forum offered a multilateral platform for cities to present specific actions to make cities resilient, focusing in particular on COVID-19 and climate change. The forum culminated in the adoption of the Geneva Declaration of Mayors, under which mayors in the ECE region undertook to strengthen the resilience of their cities, make them greener, guarantee sustainable urban transport and affordable housing for all and make their cities more equitable and more inclusive.

28. The COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, given their lesser capacity to absorb shocks. These companies, however, represent a major source of employment and economic dynamism. Supporting such companies in extending their networks, embracing digitalization and accessing international supply chains will be crucial to improving countries' resilience and fostering a sustainable recovery. ECE, together with other partners, is engaged in a global United Nations Development Account project aimed at strengthening the capacity and resilience of such enterprises to mitigate the economic and social impact of the global COVID-19 crisis.

29. In the framework of that project, ECE has developed a range of guidelines and best practices, including on how to ensure resilience and progress towards a circular economy through sustainable resource management and critical raw material supply chain solutions, and on delivering energy-efficient products and providing renewable energy equipment. The project has also developed recommendations and country case studies on women's entrepreneurship in natural resource management, focusing on challenges and opportunities in the post-COVID-19 recovery.

30. The COVID-19 crisis disrupted the supply chains of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. A series of ECE survey-based studies on Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova have documented these disruptions and the limited capacity of these companies to recover and compete in domestic and global markets. Their vulnerability was aggravated by deep-seated structural weaknesses that prevented them from relying on alternatives such as e-commerce. The studies also provided detailed action-oriented recommendations aligned with the 2030 Agenda for addressing not only current but also long-term development needs for structural transformation.

31. A green recovery must address inefficient energy consumption in buildings. Today, buildings account for approximately one third of total final energy consumption and almost 40 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions. In 2020, ECE issued guidelines to help to close the gap between technologies, standards and implementation for energy-efficient buildings. Deep energy retrofits of buildings can reduce energy demand linked to space heating by two thirds or more.

32. ECE work addresses sources of inefficiencies and waste in food. It has developed an innovative blockchain powered digital solution, FeedUP@UN, to identify, quantify and trace food lost and wasted along the food supply chain. That solution provides a centralized online marketplace to prevent "invisible food" from falling out of supply chains, thus providing additional income possibilities and employment and improving food security. The project has been developed in close collaboration with governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, certification bodies and logistics and distribution players in a single platform encompassing the entire supply chain.

33. Ageing is a well-established trend in the ECE region, and it has multiple economic and social ramifications. In most countries, vulnerability to the COVID-19 epidemic was exacerbated by an ageing population. It is therefore imperative that policies in different fields fully take into account the implications of the inexorable rise of the share of older people in the total population.

34. ECE issued the publication entitled "Guidelines for mainstreaming ageing" in March 2021 to provide methodological guidance for policymakers to systematically consider population ageing and the needs of all age groups, including older persons, across all policy fields. The guidelines contribute to implementing the promise of "leaving no one behind" in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national and local levels, with an emphasis on broad stakeholder involvement, sound age- and gender-sensitive analysis, and effective coordination of mainstreaming.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

A. Trade

35. Digitalization is making a critical contribution to facilitating international trade. ECE, through the Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, develops and maintains electronic standards in support of smart connectivity. That collaborative initiative brings together experts from nearly all member States of the ECE region and beyond.

36. The result of that work is a series of semantic standards which assist in the harmonization of and interoperability between economic operators, available free of charge to all. In the last year, over 550 e-business standards were published, of which approximately a dozen were new standards and a dozen were revised/updated standards. The Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business recommendations make a direct contribution to the implementation of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization.

37. ECE has recently issued a revised version of recommendation 33, its base guidance on single windows, allowing parties involved in trade and transport to lodge standardized information and documents with a single entry point to fulfil all import, export and transit-related regulatory requirements. ECE also maintains a series of recommendations and guidance covering themes such as legal requirements, data harmonization, disaster recovery and others.

38. Consultation and integration of private sector needs within trade facilitation reforms is a long-standing guidance in ECE recommendation 4 on national trade facilitation bodies, dating back to 1974. That has been recently updated and accompanied by a new recommendation 40 on consultation approaches. ECE continues to provide support to member States to implement these recommendations.

39. Trade is an important dimension of global sustainability efforts. Traceability tools are essential to facilitate informed consumer choices that foster sustainable trade. ECE is engaged in a pioneering project, in collaboration with the International Trade Centre, that seeks to enhance the transparency and traceability of sustainable value chains in the garment and footwear sector. The project, which has brought together hundreds of stakeholders, aims to foster the role of the sector in promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns and advancing the circular economy.

40. Digital technologies, including blockchain, are being used to facilitate traceability. A Call to Action has been submitted for approval at the next plenary of the Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business. That is a significant step forward, as it invites all actors in the garment and footwear industry to take action for traceability and transparency in their industry using an agreed set of measures, proposed by ECE and aligned with international commitments towards the 2030 development agenda.

B. Innovation

41. Innovation is the result of a complex multi-stakeholder process, in which governance aspects and linkages between different actors are paramount. The scope of ECE work on innovation goes beyond a focus on scientific and technological research and its commercialization to also encompass new business models, organizational forms and behavioural patterns. 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.

42. National Innovation for Sustainable Development Reviews are the centerpiece 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 launched the Review for Georgia in 2020, and the reviews for Armenia, the Republic of Moldova and Uzbekistan are under way for 2021.

43. ECE also supports countries in their efforts to put the review recommendations into practice through capacity-building and policy dialogue. ECE finished a comprehensive support programme on access to finance in Belarus in 2020 and is currently supporting Georgia on reforms to put into practice an innovation-enhancing procurement approach. The aim is to use the substantial potential of public spending to encourage and reward innovation that contributes to government objectives.

44. In addition, ECE has piloted and launched the 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. Launched and well received in 2020, ECE intends to turn that into a regular exercise, including also additional countries such as those participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia.

C. Finance

45. The mobilization of private financing and its alignment with sustainability goals is a critical challenge for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. ECE promotes a people-first, public-private partnership model that seeks to ensure that the collaboration between the public and the private sectors is structured and governed in a way that ensures an effective contribution to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.

46. In 2020, that work took a step further with the elaboration of a draft people-first public-private partnership evaluation methodology, which has been widely consulted. That will provide a concrete mechanism to evaluate and score infrastructure and public-private partnership projects and to determine the extent to which they meet the people-first public-private partnership designation.

47. Public-private partnerships can be used to address multiple challenges, including those related to improving the management of natural resources and fostering the shift to a more circular economy. Those challenges also present opportunities for the private sector. ECE has developed a document entitled “Guidelines on promoting people-first public-private partnerships waste-to-energy projects for the circular economy” to facilitate the engagement of the private sector while ensuring that public goals are met.

48. ECE is increasingly active on financial issues related to housing affordability and other urban issues. In 2020, ECE and Housing Europe formed a partnership and launched the #Housing2030 initiative, a housing affordability study which, among other issues, will consider access to finance and funding. The aim of the study is to improve the capacities of national and local governments to formulate policies that improve housing affordability and housing sustainability in the region. In addition, ECE is supporting several cities in the region in their efforts to tap into innovative financing for sustainable smart cities.

D. Data and statistics

49. Informed decision-making and progress assessment require integrated, relevant, timely and easily accessible data. The COVID-19 pandemic has made that even more obvious, while at the same time having a significant impact on the work of national statistical offices. National statistical offices have faced greatly increased demand for statistics to manage the pandemic and its impacts, combined with unprecedented obstacles to collecting data and producing statistics. National statistical offices have risen to that challenge, showcasing the value of official statistics. In many statistical offices, the pandemic has become an accelerator of innovation to maintain business continuity in these exceptional circumstances.

50. To support statistical production in the face of the crisis, ECE developed a wiki platform on COVID-19 and official statistics. The platform offers a space for national statistical offices and international organizations to share experiences. It contains resources both on new statistical needs to support countries in managing the crisis and on emergency measures to ensure the continuity of statistical production in core areas of economic, social and demographic statistics such as national accounts, consumer prices, population censuses and household surveys.

51. The work of ECE on statistics 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. That includes the preparation 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 March 2021, 42 countries in the ECE region had set up their national reporting platforms. The second edition of the Road Map is currently being finalized.

52. Secondly, every year, ECE reports on the progress of its member countries in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Data on the Goal indicators for ECE countries is publicly available, and a new Russian interface was created in 2021. Thirdly, ECE carries out methodological work and national statistical capacity development on demographic, social, economic and environmental statistics. In 2020, 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.

53. Eight methodological guidelines, which were developed in cooperation with multiple partners, were endorsed by the Conference of European Statisticians in 2020. They addressed the following topics: sharing economic data, climate change-related indicators, data disaggregation in poverty measurement, measuring intra-household power and decision-making, communicating gender statistics, use of longitudinal data for migration statistics, censuses beyond 2020, and the new version of the Generic Statistical Information Model. Four draft guidelines and recommendations were prepared for discussion by the Conference in 2021, including the second edition of the Road Map on statistics for the Sustainable Development Goals, waste statistics framework, assessing the quality of administrative sources for use in censuses and measuring social exclusion.

54. The work of ECE on statistics is particularly attentive to new developments and emerging issues. In 2020, the ECE High-level Group for the Modernization of Official Statistics implemented two priority projects: the second phase of the machine learning project and the input privacy preservation project.

55. Capacity development initiatives have helped to translate methodological work into real change. In 2020, ECE carried out 10 online regional training workshops, five

national field projects and various advisory activities to support individual countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

56. In January 2020, ECE launched the Regional Coordination Group on Data and Statistics, in response to the Secretary-General's recommendation to "launch a region-by-region change management process that will seek to consolidate existing capacities with regard to data and statistics" (A/74/73-E/2019/14, para. 115), in the context of the United Nations development system reform. The Group, co-chaired by ECE and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), brings together representatives of 25 United Nations and non-United Nations agencies operating at the regional level, as well as the data and statistics focal points from the United Nations country teams. Its focus is on the coordination of statistical capacity development activities in the region and providing coherent support to the country teams.

57. ECE also carries out statistical and monitoring work addressing the needs of particular sectors. 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 UNEP 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.

58. ECE has continued to support countries in their efforts to enhance environmental monitoring, raising the capacity of member States to identify data needs and produce statistics and indicators on environment and health in response to the coronavirus disease. ECE, together with UNEP, aided countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia and West Balkans in improving health-relevant air quality data and the production and use of waste management and other environmental indicators.

59. A major development in sectoral statistics in 2021 was the launch of a new data platform on forests in the region. That represents a significant milestone in ECE efforts to facilitate access to relevant and reliable data on the sector. Data is central in order to protect, maintain and sustainably manage forests. However, too often, data on forests is scarce, dispersed over various online platforms and has limited accessibility.

60. Building on its long history of working on forest monitoring, data and assessment in the region, the INForest platform gathers key information on forests and the forest-based sector in the ECE region in one place. That unique platform offers the most up-to-date information about the size of forests and changes across time, the structure of forests, detailed information about the goods and services forests provide, as well as their contribution to the health of our economies, societies and the environment.

61. ECE contributed to the Global Forest Resource Assessment 2020 report, including the collection of related data, which is available online. Contrary to global trends, forest area in the ECE region has increased over the past three decades by 33.5 million hectares.

E. Technical cooperation

62. Technical cooperation activities aim to improve the 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 who 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.

63. In 2020, ECE delivered approximately 100 advisory missions and capacity-building activities and 50 targeted field projects. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, most capacity-building activities were delivered online, which allowed funds to be repurposed for the implementation of field projects. ECE took an active role in defining the scope of the United Nations Development Account rapid response to COVID-19 projects and participated in four out of five projects as either an implementing partner or a lead agency.

64. ECE has continued to strengthen its coordination with the resident coordinators and United Nations country teams in 17 United Nations programme countries in the region. It has regularly participated in task forces for socioeconomic response plan and provided inputs to the plans in those countries. It has 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 and providing quality assurance through the Peer Support Group for more than 20 planning documents.

IV. Spotlight on sustainable mobility and smart connectivity

65. The COVID-19 crisis severely disrupted transport and trade linkages, thus undermining the very fabric of international economic cooperation. ECE has supported its member States in devising solutions that minimize the impact of these disruptions and accelerate recovery. Beyond the emergency situation, improved connectivity can boost recovery, facilitate economic activity and tap into the potential of trade to deliver increased prosperity in the region. The transformation of the transport sector and the deployment of new mobility solutions are critical to the transition to a green economy. ECE continues to support its member States to advance sustainable mobility and smart connectivity in the region based on a nexus approach that brings together various strains of work in different sectors.

66. The global response to reducing the spread of COVID-19 has been characterized by limited coordination, which has undermined its effectiveness and increased negative impacts. ECE has documented the various practices and initiatives that have emerged during the COVID-19 crisis in a publication.¹

67. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed weaknesses and shown the importance of preparing for future global shocks. At its 83rd session, on February 2021, the ECE Inland Transport Committee endorsed a ministerial resolution entitled “Enhancing resilient inland transport connectivity in emergency situations: an urgent call for concerted action”. It called for all signatories to take stock of the global emergency under way and commit to taking the actions necessary to reduce uncertainty and increase the predictability and efficient deployment of mutually accepted measures in emergency situations.

68. To ensure the delivery of essential goods and to limit the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic due to supply chain disruptions, ECE launched an Observatory on Border Crossings Status due to COVID-19, which gathers all information on cross-

¹ *Intermodal Transport in the Age of COVID-19: Practices, Initiatives and Responses*, United Nations publication (2021).

border limitations worldwide directly from governments, partner organizations and the transport sector.

69. ECE has helped countries coordinate emergency measures under United Nations transport agreements to ensure the delivery of medical supplies, including oxygen. The cold chain logistics developed by 50 countries under the ECE Agreement on the International Carriage of Perishable Foodstuffs and on the Special Equipment to be used for such Carriage will be used for the global roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccines.

70. The COVID-19 crisis emphasized the importance of digital solutions, giving new impulse to an existing trend. In 2020, countries adopted legal provisions for the full computerization of the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention). TIR enables transport and logistics companies worldwide to reduce cross-border transport time and costs. Successful piloting of the digitalized “eTIR” system has demonstrated how it can unlock further efficiency gains, which would be particularly useful for landlocked developing countries. To combat COVID-19 disruptions, eTIR can facilitate the seamless operation of supply chains while reducing virus transmission risks by minimizing physical contact between customs officers and truck drivers. In 2020, Egypt became the 77th party to the TIR Convention.

71. The COVID-19 crisis emphasized the need to dematerialize cross-border supply chains, in order to avoid physical contact between individuals while increasing the efficiency of transport and trade operations. However, efforts to digitalize transport and supply chains thus far have been rather fragmented. It is increasingly recognized that globally accepted standards and a common framework for leveraging data to better assess risks are required.

72. ECE aims to support countries in addressing these issues by offering a common foundation of semantic standards through the Multimodal Transport Reference Data Model of the Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business. That would provide an electronic lingua franca for a seamless and contactless flow of data and documents in cross-border trade and transport, among the ECE member States, but also around the world.

73. Significant progress has been made in the completion of a package of standards for the digitalization of data in key documents accompanying goods moved by different modes of transport. As part of a high-profile multi-agency United Nations Development Account project on transport and trade connectivity in the age of the pandemic, ECE is working on the harmonization of standards for digitalizing multimodal transport data and document exchange. The objective is to use the Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business standards and reference data models to enable the interoperability of data exchange between documents, modes of transport and sectors. That will allow for a seamless exchange of information, for example in digital corridors, and will limit person-to-person contacts in the supply chain.

74. Pilot implementation projects have been successfully carried out, including pilot project on digitalizing the multimodal bill of lading of the International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations. Another successful test focused on the exports of wood and cellulose from Belarus to Central Europe via the Dnieper-Black Sea-Danube route, using the Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business standards for information exchange in road, railway, sea and inland water transportation.

75. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a better overall understanding of the need for standards in digitalizing international supply chains. The use of United Nations standards, provided as international public goods, can help to improve the efficiency and health safety of international transport and trade. Data mapping and alignment with the United Nations standards allows for interoperability among documents in the

various modes of transport. ECE does not impose solutions (such as ready electronic documents) to stakeholders, but provides instruments for interoperability.

76. Beyond the demands created by the COVID-19 crisis, advancing sustainable mobility is critical for making further progress in decarbonization and meeting the 2030 Agenda. The greening of the transport sector is a major challenge but also a source of opportunities in the post COVID-19 recovery. A joint ECE/International Labour Organization study under the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme estimated that 10 million additional jobs could be created worldwide – 2.9 million in the ECE region alone – if 50 per cent of all vehicles manufactured were electric. Harmonized United Nations regulations developed at ECE cover electric vehicles. In addition, almost 5 million new jobs could be created worldwide – 2.5 million in the ECE region – if countries doubled investment in public transport.

77. Climate change will have an impact on the transport infrastructure, and action must be taken in advance to mitigate that impact. A pioneering ECE study mapped transport infrastructure that is at high risk owing to climate change in the pan-European region and Canada. It presented an initial exploration of areas of potential risk, or hotspots, which could warrant more in-depth assessment, offering a tool that will help to prioritize adaptation efforts.

78. Inland water transport has a significant potential to support the shift towards decarbonization while reducing costs. The region's network has expanded in recent years, increasing by almost 6 per cent between 1998 and 2016. The percentage of those waterways complying with the standards laid out in the European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance, administered by ECE, rose from 79 to 83 per cent. ECE has issued new recommendations to help countries tap into the green and cost-saving potential of inland water transport.

79. Intelligent transport systems can unlock major benefits in terms of safety, efficiency and environmental performance. However, with the rapid pace of innovation in that area, ensuring interoperability and the harmonization of technological solutions between countries remains a key challenge to realizing the potential of such systems at a large scale. To facilitate those efforts, the ECE Inland Transport Committee endorsed a new road map to guide the development of intelligent transport systems.

80. Hydrogen has a potentially important role in decarbonizing the transport sector by integrating a higher share of renewable energy sources. However, although clean and versatile, hydrogen is not an energy source, but an energy vector: it must be produced, transported and stored before being converted to other forms of energy. Supporting the sustainable energy shift needed for a green recovery, ECE has issued recommendations to help scale up hydrogen use in the region. Among other activities, it is implementing a project to improve the capacity of the Government of Ukraine to develop infrastructure for the production and use of hydrogen to support a green post-COVID-19 recovery.

81. Policy advice provided under the programme of Environmental Performance Reviews also covers the environmental implications of different policy choices and transport modes, in view of anticipated trends. For example, the third Environmental Performance Review of Uzbekistan helped the country to review the integration of environmental concerns into transport policies and made recommendations towards sustainable mobility in anticipation of a dramatic growth in the transport sector in the coming decades. In Montenegro, ECE assisted the authorities in preparing a guide on fuel consumption and carbon dioxide emissions for new passenger car models available on the domestic market.

82. The transformation of the transport sector will require significant regulatory changes that will shape how vehicles are produced and used. ECE plays a central role in facilitating agreements on these changes. The ECE World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations has adopted the first binding international regulation on “level 3” vehicle automation, marking an important step towards the wider deployment of automated vehicles to help to realize a vision of safer, more sustainable mobility for all. Japan and the European Union announced they will apply the regulation following its entry into force in January 2021.

83. ECE endorsed a new United Nations regulation featuring the Worldwide Harmonized Light Vehicles Test Procedure. Following its entry into force in January 2021, most cars sold globally will comply with its stringent emissions requirements.

84. Two new United Nations regulations on cybersecurity and software updates became the first ever internationally harmonized and binding norms in that area. Given the widespread use of United Nations regulations in the global automotive sector, the broad adoption of these regulations across the world is expected. The need to strengthen automotive cybersecurity is likely to trigger massive investments and change across the sector.

85. The transformation of mobility has significant environmental and health implications. The Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme supports countries in taking actions to shape, support and promote healthier and more effective transport options. A publication entitled “Recommendations for green and healthy sustainable transport – Building Forward Better” were incorporated in the declaration of the fifth High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment.

86. The design of transport systems and the availability of connectivity options in urban environments have consequences for inclusion that should be considered when making policy choices. ECE, as part of its ongoing work on ageing, drew attention through a policy brief to the need to ensure age-friendly transport and enabling, accessible and safe environments that support older persons in remaining mobile and independent in their communities.

87. There is an unresolved issue regarding transport that predates the COVID-19 pandemic: a global road safety crisis that costs some 1.35 million lives each year, which prompted the adoption of General Assembly resolution [74/299](#), in which the Assembly proclaimed a Second Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021–2030. In the resolution, the Assembly, among other measures, invites a continued mobilization of efforts through the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Road Safety, whose secretariat is provided by ECE, and encourages all Member States that have not yet done so to accede to the United Nations legal instruments on road safety, which are administered by ECE, and to enforce their provisions to address the major causes of crashes.

88. In the past two years, the United Nations Road Safety Fund has been supporting low- and middle-income countries, where 90 per cent of fatalities occur, to address gaps in their road safety systems. In 2020, the Fund announced 10 projects in 12 countries, with 50 per cent of the total budget of \$4 million allocated to 5 projects in 7 countries in Africa. ECE and UNDP helped Bosnia and Herzegovina to develop a framework road safety strategy and action plan, harnessing United Nations legal instruments to halve road fatalities by 2030.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

89. ECE has sought to enhance existing partnerships and develop new ones to provide a more effective response to the COVID-19 crisis while advancing further

sustainable development. These partnerships most often concern specific projects or activities. They also crystallize into programmes of work, including, for example, the long-standing collaboration on forests between ECE and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

90. Institutional mechanisms of cooperation among the entities of the regional United Nations development system have been strengthened, building on the progress of recent years. The Regional Collaborative Platform for Europe and Central Asia, the main internal collaboration platform for sustainable development among the entities of the United Nations system in the region, was formally established in December 2020. ECE is part of the joint secretariat that services the Platform, and its Executive Secretary is one of the two vice-chairs of the Platform. The 2021 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the ECE region, which, as previous Forums, was organized by ECE in close collaboration with the United Nations regional system, is a prominent example of how broad partnerships with other entities are being pursued to advance sustainable development.

91. ECE work on the environment relies on strong partnerships with multiple environmental agencies, including in relation to capacity-building and policy advisory activities. ECE has been pivotal in bringing about increased coherence and effectiveness on environmental matters in the region of Europe and Central Asia. Together with UNEP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, ECE is co-leading the inter-agency issue-based coalition on environment and climate change, which brings together 18 agencies, funds and programmes active in the region.

92. The coalition, which is active as of January 2020, addresses activities dedicated to strengthening environmental and climate change governance, improving environmental management and climate change mitigation and adaptation, and promoting the sustainable management of natural resources. To respond to the immediate needs of resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, the coalition developed key recommendations and a compendium of measures to green the post-pandemic recovery.

93. ECE continued to strengthen its cooperation with multiple organizations in relation with activities under the Espoo Convention and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment. It has recently worked with partners in the European Union-funded “European Union for Environment” (EU4Environment) Action to contribute to the sustainability of post-COVID-19 economic recovery projects in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Investment Bank has targeted the drafting of guidance on assessing health impacts in strategic environmental assessments. ECE works with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Energy Agency of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OSCE) on the preparation of guidance on the application of the Espoo Convention to the lifetime extension of nuclear power plants.

94. Transboundary water cooperation requires funding. However, associated investments are sometimes perceived as risky, while the pandemic has increased financial constraints. ECE has recently strengthened its cooperation with key international financial institutions under the framework of the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. That cooperation materialized in the development of a background study on financing transboundary water cooperation and basin development and the organization of a joint global workshop on the same topic in December 2020.

95. The secretariat to the Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents, which provides a legal instrument for disaster risk reduction, has been

cooperating closely with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. In addition, the Convention secretariat works collaboratively with other international organizations to strengthen mine tailings safety as part of mineral resource governance.

96. ECE cooperates with OSCE on a range of economic, trade, energy and environmental development issues. The OSCE network of 60 Aarhus centres in 14 countries supports the implementation of the Aarhus Convention. The Aarhus Convention is applied in the projects and policies of several international financial institutions worldwide.

97. The European Environment Agency is a strong partner in the ECE Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Programme. That collaboration also includes work on climate change statistics, open data, e-government and environmental information-sharing and dissemination. EEA also cooperates with the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme.

98. Work on the digitalization of supply chains has fostered cooperation among United Nations agencies working on different modes of transport, notably ECE, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Maritime Organization. Many other international organizations and business associations active in relation to other means of transport are also engaged in these efforts.

99. In 2020, a new partnership between the International Organization for Standardization, the World Customs Organization and ECE was established to support increased maritime digitalization. That represents a major step towards increased efficiency in that sector by securing interoperability between the standards of each organization.

100. ECE, together with the United Nations Population Fund, WHO, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and HelpAge International launched a new joint programme on ageing (2020–2023), which envisages collaborative action among agencies of the United Nations system and civil society stakeholders at the regional and national levels, working closely with governments across Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

101. The work of the new programme will focus on enhancing preparedness and emergency response to mitigate the risks for older persons during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; supporting the delivery of integrated health and social care for older people in Europe and Central Asia to ensure ageing with dignity; and promoting the human rights of older persons, including through the creation of participatory and enabling environments

VI. Conclusion

102. The COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges and prompted setbacks in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region. The uneven impact within and across countries demands a continued focus on leaving no one behind and a strengthening of technical cooperation and other support activities for an inclusive recovery. Providing effective responses that address the complexity of the problems requires reaching out to partners and internal arrangements that facilitate bringing together different perspectives.

103. The crisis has accelerated some trends, such as digitalization, that will remain influential after the crisis subsides. The emergency situation prompted changes in operational activities that are unlikely to be completely reversed once the situation normalizes. Important lessons should be drawn from the experiences collected in

these difficult circumstances that can make future action more effective, in terms of both the identification of emerging trends and working methods.

104. The need to anticipate future problems and the preventative approach that lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been validated by the recent crisis. As the emergency situation subsides, it is critical that the recovery is built on solid foundations that address the urgent need for climate action and improving the health of ecosystems.
