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**Main directions of UNECE ongoing work on further
SDG alignment**

Note by the Secretariat

Since taking office in June 2017, the UNECE Executive Secretary has led a process of internal review to ensure that UNECE is well aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The present note outlines the main directions of this ongoing process.

EXCOM is invited to take note of the information provided. The secretariat looks forward to an exchange of ideas on this initiative to benefit from the views of its member States.

1. Background

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda has provided a new sense of direction to international cooperation while raising the level of commitment and ambition. The universal character of the 2030 Agenda means that all countries are concerned by this transformative challenge. In both national governments and international organizations, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have prompted a rethinking of the focus of activities and of the existing structures and working methods for their implementation.

The repositioning of the United Nations development system spearheaded by the Secretary-General, in response to a General Assembly request, aims to ensure that the reform enhances the capacity of the system to address the full range of development challenges of our time in an integrated manner, as set in the 2030 Agenda.

Regional economic commissions are called to play an important role in assisting countries with advancing SDGs. They perform three interconnected core functions: conveners, results-oriented think-tanks and providers of technical assistance. These functions will play out differently according to the regional context. In particular, many SDGs have a transboundary dimension that requires collective reflection and action at the regional level. The reform of the UN development system is an ongoing process and member States will decide on its final shape. The efforts of UNECE to further align its activities with the SDGs will be synchronized with the outcome of the deliberations on the reform of the UN development system.

UNECE's ability to adjust is hampered by strong resource constraints, after suffering a number of post cuts over the past years, and some decline in extrabudgetary funding. Regular budget appropriations for the current biennium have fallen by almost 20 per cent in comparison with 2012-2013. UNECE was the only regional economic commission that did not receive post resources for the 2030 Agenda.

2. Overall strategic orientation

The Sustainable Development Goals and their associated targets define an ambitious agenda that opens new perspectives for policymaking and international cooperation. Its integrated character calls

for an assessment of the linkages and complementarities that exist between different goals and targets in order to make more effective choices.

UNECE's work programme is focused on supporting member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through concrete and results-oriented activities in eight broad areas or subprogrammes: environment, transport, statistics, economic cooperation and integration, sustainable energy, trade, timber and forestry, and housing, land management and population.

In all of these areas, the intergovernmental Sectoral Committees and their subsidiary bodies have assessed the relevance of their activities against the SDGs, made adjustments in their work programmes in support of the 2030 Agenda and continue to explore further opportunities to enhance their contribution to SDG implementation.

Going beyond the efforts made so far by each subprogramme on aligning their activities with the SDGs, the UNECE Executive Secretary is driving a comprehensive assessment of options to enhance the impact of UNECE work, within existing mandates.

The overall strategic orientation for UNECE to support its member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda aims to:

- focus on UNECE core strengths; and
- use the UNECE multi-sectoral structure to tackle SDGs in a cross-sectoral, integrated manner.

This strategic orientation will be pursued with the overarching goal of ensuring a forward-looking organization that is able to address new and emerging challenges. Such a goal will require continued attention to the evolving needs of this diverse region and the anticipation of future changes.

In order to translate this strategic vision into concrete impactful actions, the Secretariat will be adopting a number of changes regarding organization and methods of work, communication initiatives and partnership engagement.

The success of UNECE to a large extent has historically relied on the ability of its small Secretariat to mobilize a large amount of external expertise, in different ways. UNECE's function as a think-tank, as outlined in the current discussions on the reform of the UN development system, largely relies on the engagement of external contributors to our various areas of work. This engagement ensures contributions that are relevant and action-oriented, resulting in outputs that are widely shared—a "think-and-do" tank in practice.

Implementing change will therefore require strengthening different types of partnerships and collaboration with various actors. This will allow the organization to leverage its limited resources to tap into additional expertise and broaden the channels for the dissemination of its outputs. The efforts to reach out to different partners will include experts from governments and the business sector, civil society and academia, institutional forms of collaboration with other UN and international organizations, or public-private partnerships in support of SDG implementation.

Throughout these changes, the Secretariat will remain particularly mindful of the need to develop, collect and assess various measures of the impact of UNECE activities. Such commitment will contribute to retaining a continuous focus on delivering effective change. It will also provide useful lessons that can inform future programme development.

This document provides an overview of the rationale for the changes proposed and some immediate actions that will advance the process of change.

3. UNECE strengths

UNECE activities seek to promote sustainable development in the region by:

- Improving connectivity;
- Reducing environmental pressures and using resources more sustainably;
- Contributing to creating more dynamic and resilient economies.

Within this overall orientation, the strengths of UNECE in SDG implementation are:

- Specialization in some substantive areas – what we do;
- Functional capabilities – how we do it.

The UNECE secretariat has identified nine SDGs where UNECE has a comparative advantage and provides the most value added. This is the result of discussions within senior management and a broader participatory initiative with UNECE staff led by the Executive Secretary. The nine SDGs that define the core specialization of UNECE are SDGs 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 15. These SDGs largely overlap with those where the first report of the Secretary-General on the repositioning of the United Nations Development System identified gaps in coverage in the UN system as a whole.^a

In order to strengthen the impact of its work and within current mandates, UNECE intends to enhance activities in these areas, making proposals to relevant intergovernmental bodies as appropriate. A sharpened focus will also bring benefits in terms of visibility, brand recognition and communication. It will also facilitate exploiting the potential for cross-sectoral collaboration.

^a Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: ensuring a better future for all. Report of the Secretary-General, 11 July 2017, A/72/124-E/2018/3, para 51.



The focus on these nine core added-value areas goes hand in hand with UNECE's functional strengths. In line with the role attributed to regional economic commissions in the current discussions on the reform of the UN development pillar, this means exploiting UNECE convening power, which serves both to identify needs and to work collectively to provide solutions to these identified challenges. UNECE has also a proven competitive advantage in normative production and the identification of best practices, which is relevant for all its member States, independently of the level of economic development. UNECE is also well positioned to provide targeted capacity-building activities to support the implementation of its normative outputs and related policy advisory work in those countries that request it. The participation in the 17 UNDAFs in the region demonstrates the reach and value of technical cooperation activities provided by UNECE.

4. A more agile organization exploiting opportunities for cross-sectoral work

SDG alignment offers a reference framework to increase the impact of UNECE activities. This alignment should be understood as a dynamic process, where new opportunities can be explored and acted upon, while respecting existing mandates and within currently available resources, to better serve the demands of member States and the UN system.

Opportunities will likely lie in new cross-sectoral activities, as the 2030 Agenda creates new possibilities for collaboration that reflect the linkages between different goals and targets. This type of activities would allow the organization to exploit existing synergies, increase the efficiency of its work and have a multiplying effect on its actions to implement the SDGs. It is therefore necessary to nurture a cooperative culture across subprogrammes that facilitates undertaking cross-sectoral activities.

This strategic orientation builds on the experiences and achievements of cross-sectoral work in UNECE, with already multiple instances of cooperation between subprogrammes, both formal and informal. Some of these initiatives are well established and underpinned by institutional structures or organizational arrangements that are clearly reflected in work programmes^b.

a) High-impact areas

The first step in translating this strategic orientation into practice is the identification of high-impact areas where multiple SDGs converge (SDG “nexus clusters”). The criteria used for the identification of these areas include:

- Relevance of the areas proposed for the current and future challenges facing the UNECE region, so that work on these areas contributes to serve existing or anticipated demands and make the organization future-proof;
- Existence of core UNECE expertise and products to address multifaceted issues in these areas by integrating activities under different subprogrammes and engaging into meaningful partnerships.

Four possible high-impact areas have been singled out as a result of the ongoing reflection:

- Sustainable use of natural resources;
- Sustainable and smart cities;
- Sustainable mobility and smart connectivity;
- Measuring and monitoring SDGs (methodology).

Annex provides a description of the area “Sustainable and smart cities”, where initial efforts to develop this strategic initiative will be focused and which serves for illustrative purposes of the concept.

The value of these high-impact areas is multiple, as they can serve to:

- Concentrate resources to address the multiple aspects of complex, multifaceted issues;
- Facilitate partnerships, including with other organizations of the UN system;
- Give potential access to new constituencies and promote a cross-sectoral dialogue with external clients;
- Provide more visibility to dispersed efforts under a common theme.

^b Mapping of inter-sectoral and inter-divisional activities in UNECE, Economic Commission for Europe, Executive Committee, Informal Document No. 2016/58

b) A matrix approach to facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation

Changes in working methods will be necessary to fully exploit the potential benefits of collaborating together across sectoral divisions on nexus areas. The strategic orientation is to shift towards a matrix approach where staff, in a flexible way, contributes not only to sectoral work at the subprogramme level (vertical commitment) but also to common initiatives involving several subprogrammes (horizontal orientation).

Cross-divisional teams will be created as flexible arrangements to strengthen established synergies/complementarities among UNECE sub-programmes and identify opportunities for possible new activities in high-impact areas. Composition of the teams would be flexible and engage staff most relevant to the tasks at hand. This informal set-up will operate within existing mandates and does not imply changes in the subprogrammes or intergovernmental structures. No financial implications will result from the formation and operation of these teams.

These cross-sectoral teams will:

- Provide a space for exchange of information and discussion to better anticipate current and future needs of member States and other clients and cover expertise gaps;
- Identify the various complementary products and services that UNECE can provide to attend to all member States' and UN country teams' demands on a particular theme, thus offering an integrated solution to their requests;
- Develop partnerships under a common thematic umbrella;
- Contribute to communication initiatives on the basis of an integrated narrative;
- Track and collect measures of the impact of UNECE initiatives;
- Relay relevant information to senior management and intergovernmental bodies;
- Make proposals on joint activities to intergovernmental bodies, as appropriate;
- Develop projects and seek extra-budgetary funding for cross-sectoral initiatives, when suitable;

This matrix approach has multiple benefits:

- Contributes to create an organization that is more responsive to the needs of member States by increasing the impact of its activities and improving its ability to identify and react to future trends;
- Facilitates cooperation across vertical silos in support of cross-sectoral policy integration;
- Contributes to a better understanding of client needs and facilitates the delivery of integrated solutions to their problems;
- Strengthens staff understanding of the overall mission of the organization in the context of Agenda 2030 and contributes to develop broader perspectives and skills to facilitate its delivery.

Annex

Nexus area “Smart and sustainable cities”










SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities is one of the identified core SDGs for UNECE. Many subprogrammes are contributing to the implementation of targets under this SDG. In addition, SDG 11 has linkages with many other SDGs, including the other eight UNECE core SDGs.

The solution of many sustainable development challenges – in transport, energy, economic development, management of natural resources and many others – passes through finding and implementing appropriate solutions at the city level.

The rate of urbanization is high in the UNECE region and it is expected to continue to increase. In some parts of the region, where urbanization rates are comparatively low, faster growth can be expected. Cities are and will increasingly become a major focus for the delivery of SDGs. At this level, the linkages between SDGs often appear as particularly visible and the need for integrated solutions is strong.

The high-impact area “Smart and sustainable cities” can group existing UNECE activities under a common umbrella. This will provide a new narrative to integrate and communicate our work, while reaching out to new constituencies. It will also facilitate strengthening existing partnerships and developing new ones. The table below shows some examples of the different initial contributions that various subprogrammes could make to this area and the formation of a cross-sectoral team. This should not be seen as a closed list: the rationale of the cross-sectoral teams is that composition is flexible to attend to changing demands and explore new opportunities.

Table 1. Working together on Smart and Sustainable Cities

| UNECE Sub-programmes | Examples of mandates/activities | Contributes more robustly to SDG |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Housing and land management | New Urban Agenda Affordable housing Land use and planning Country profiles |   |
| Energy | Energy efficiency in buildings Natural gas |   |
| Transport | Intelligent Transport Systems Urban Transport Automated vehicles Road Safety THE PEP |   |
| Environment | Air Convention Industrial Accidents and Espoo Conventions Environmental Performance Reviews |   |
| Forests | Urban forestry Green/wooden buildings Green belts |  |
| Economic Cooperation and Integration | PPPs; Innovation in cities Smart infrastructure applications | |
| Trade | Smart and ebusiness standards; Internet of Things/Blockchain; risk management; removal of trade barriers | |