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**Statement**

**by**

**Ms. Tatiana Molcean**

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General  
Executive Secretary  
of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at**

**Civil Society Pre-Meeting to the 2024 UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable  
Development**

**Geneva, 12 March 2024**

Dear representatives of civil society and youth, dear friends,

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you on behalf of UNECE to today's Civil Society and Youth Pre-Meetings ahead of the 2024 Regional Forum. It is my first time addressing this Forum and it is a real pleasure to do so. The work of civil society actors such as yourself, often overlooked, is crucial in achieving equitable and lasting sustainable development.

I wish that we were meeting in more positive times however, we are all aware that we are not on track to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. In recent years, the world -and our region- have been hit by several shocks that have created a more difficult context to advance on the SDGs. COVID-19, the war against Ukraine and persistent economic uncertainty have darkened sustainable development prospects.

At the same time, the cost of inaction and the exposure of our societies to multiple risks have become increasingly apparent. In these challenging circumstances, it is critical that we redouble our efforts and increase the effectiveness of our action to reclaim lost ground.

Our recently released UNECE SDG progress report, looking at the broader UNECE region, shows that only 17% of measurable targets will be met by 2030, based on current trends.

Looking specifically at the in-focus SDGs of this year, the picture becomes even more bleak. For three of the SDGs under review: SDG 2 Zero Hunger, SDG 13 Climate Action and SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong institutions, not a single sub-goal is on track to be achieved.

However, with the Political Declaration adopted at the SDG Summit, UN Member States made a renewed and ambitious commitment to SDG implementation. It is imperative now to hold member States to account for acting on this declaration and to work with them to identify key areas for improvement and transformational change.

In a few months, the Summit of the Future is expected to provide further impulse to multilateral cooperation in support of SDG acceleration. The Pact for the

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Future, which is expected to be agreed at the Summit, will consider how to meaningfully include young people in decision-making. The zero draft of the Pact for the Future recognizes the important contributions of young persons and children as critical agents of change in promoting sustainable development, human rights and peace and security. And that the young will live with the consequences of our actions.

We need you to forge a common consensus on the future we want to build and to participate in an intergenerational dialogue. This is essential to ensuring that global governance meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The strengthening of the ECOSOC envisaged in the zero draft of the Pact of the Future includes a commitment for a more structured and inclusive engagement of NGOs, youth and other major groups.

We need to hear all voices, yes, – but we also need to act on what we hear.

I urge you to maintain your engagement even as it becomes more challenging and hope that your messages and ideas are heeded by decision makers in the region and beyond.

Space for civil society is unfortunately shrinking in parts of the UNECE region - including by legislation aiming to criminalize civil society organizations or by efforts to marginalize women, minorities or other vulnerable groups. And those who dare to speak up can end up harassed, prosecuted, or worse.

This is also being compounded by a funding crisis that is preventing the levels of civil society participation that we have had in the past. Youth engagement is also hampered by insufficient funding levels.

Let me therefore affirm that UNECE remains committed to supporting meaningful civil society and youth participation in all areas of our work and specifically in this context of ensuring equitable and effective SDG implementation.

Youth networking and civil society meetings, like this one, are a well-established feature of the annual Regional Forum. And we have been deploying an increased number of initiatives to engage youth in our work. In December 2022, we

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launched a Youth Dialogue to contribute to shape a long-term vision for the future of the UNECE region.

Youth engagement is being embedded in UNECE's intergovernmental structure. For example, the Expert Group on Resource Management Young Member Group seeks to promote intergenerational equity in the energy and resource industries. A Youth Task Force on Education for Sustainable Development is being established.

Looking ahead to the coming days, I encourage you to be unsparing in your interventions and ask the difficult questions about why this region is not on-track. I also greatly look forward to your contribution to the Second Plenary session of the Forum that looks ahead to the Summit of the Future and the necessary transformations for SDG acceleration, bringing your perspectives to a conversation that cannot take place without you.

Let me finish with extending my personal gratitude: for your commitment, your energy and your passion. I know it is not always easy to perform the work that you do, and yet, every day, you continue to push for the change we desperately need. For this I can only say thank you.

I wish you a productive meeting today and very much look forward to your contributions to the Regional Forum discussions in the next two days.

Thank you.

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