

## 2020 Regional Results Report of the UN System for Europe and Central Asia

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In the reporting period 2020, the entities of the regional United Nations system in Europe and Central Asia provided collective support and offered policy guidance and tools to address key sustainable development challenges in the region. As the regional UN system was transitioning to the new architecture of the Regional Collaborative Platform, it assisted member States as well as UN Country Teams in their support to governments to respond to the urgencies of the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, several multi-agency Issue-based Coalitions – the substantive arms of the UN in the region – achieved results and supported decision-makers in crucial areas such as health and well-being; social protection; gender equality; youth and adolescents; migration, displacement and resilience; sustainable food systems; and environment and climate change. In addition, the UN entities in the region jointly contributed to regional intergovernmental processes and collaborated to advance digitalisation and data and statistics support. Substantive and operational support to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams as well as the rolling out of a significant number of new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks were among the main priorities. The collaboration and provision of targeted support and expertise at the regional level, further strengthened through the repositioning of the regional UN development system, will remain a key element in accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in the context of a sustainable COVID-19 recovery.*

#### 1. Introduction

In the year 2020, as mandated in ECOSOC resolution 2020/23 Progress in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, the regional UN system in Europe and Central Asia transitioned to the new architecture of the Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP), which was formally established in December 2020. Comprising over 30 UN entities, the regional UN system provides collective, multi-agency support to member States to advance the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the reporting period of 2020, helping to strengthen the response to the far-reaching COVID-19 crisis represented a particularly urgent priority.

Building on a long-standing practice of cooperation among the regional UN entities in Europe and Central Asia, the initiative of the UN Secretary-General to reposition the UN Development System (UNDS) provided a welcome opportunity to further advance collaboration and joint action. As part of the reform and to enhance transparency and results-based management, the UN Secretary-General proposed to prepare an annual report on system-wide results of the UN at the regional level in support of the 2030 Agenda that should focus on collective achievements and joint system-wide impact at the regional level.

The present report has been prepared in response to this request and is shared with member States on the occasion of the fifth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

for the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Region (17-18 March 2021). Its main part is based on the achievements of the regional Issue-based Coalitions, which are multi-agency coalitions coordinating the UN response to cross-cutting challenges in the region, and other regional interagency groups. Selected regional or subregional flagship programmes carried out by multiple agencies, joint contributions to regional intergovernmental processes and data and statistics support are also highlighted.

To put the system-wide results at the regional level in the broader context, the report starts by providing a brief overview of the current status of implementation of the regional UNDS reform, the particular regional challenges to sustainable development, and the strategic response of the UN system to these challenges.

## 2. Advancing the UN Secretary-General's reforms at the regional level in Europe and Central Asia

Repositioning the United Nations Development System (UNDS) at the regional level has been part of the overall UNDS reform. The regional review has aimed at achieving greater cohesion, a larger impact and more transparency for United Nations regional assets to support results on the ground. To better connect the regional UNDS entities and to advance collaboration, the UN Secretary-General has made recommendations in five transformative areas to revamp the regional architecture. Member States, through an ECOSOC and General Assembly resolution<sup>1</sup>, welcomed the efforts of the UN Secretary-General in formulating these recommendations and requested the UN Secretary-General to continue to conduct and rely on, in the course of the implementation process, transparent and inclusive consultations with all countries concerned at all levels. The recommendations are in the process of being implemented as follows:

### *Recommendation 1: Establishing the Regional Collaborative Platform for Europe and Central Asia*

The Regional Collaborative Platform for Europe and Central Asia (RCP-ECA) as the main internal collaboration platform for sustainable development among the entities of the UN system in Europe and Central Asia was formally established in December 2020. The RCP-ECA is serviced by a joint secretariat that is provided by the UN Development Coordination Office for Europe and Central Asia (UNDCO), the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (RBEC) and the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), under the overall direction of the RCP Chair, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, and the two Vice-Chairs of the platform, the UNECE Executive Secretary and the Director of the UNDP RBEC.

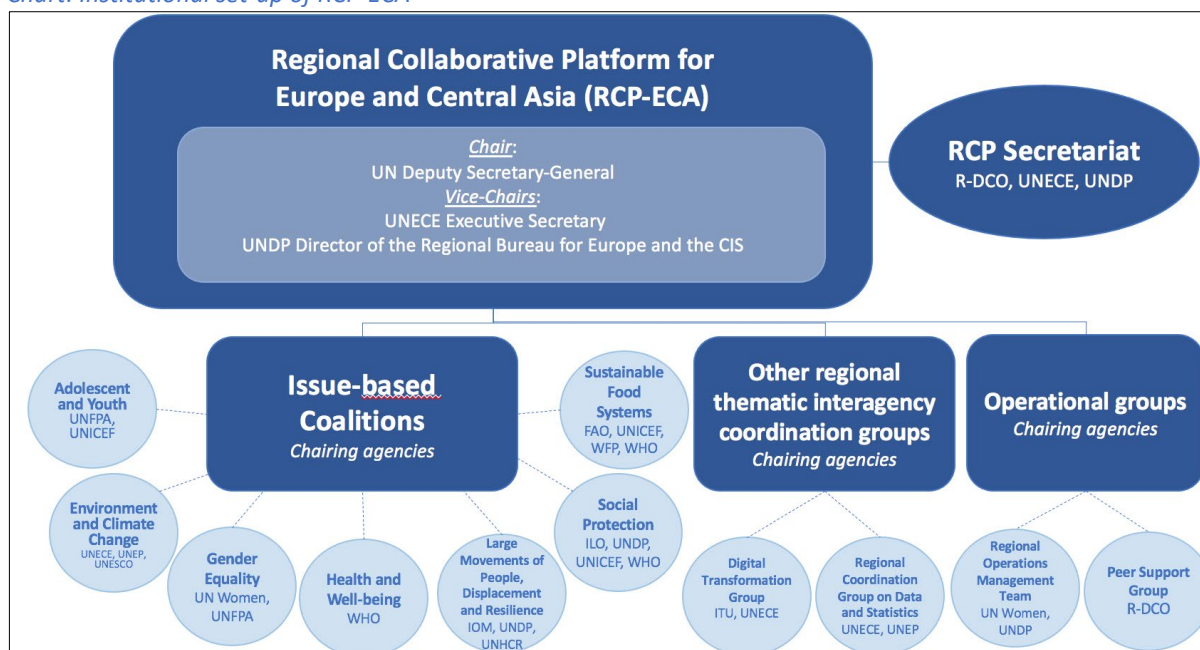
The RCP's inaugural annual workplan, covering the period from December 2020 – December 2021, focuses on the continuing implementation of the regional UNDS repositioning and the key results of the seven regional Issue-based Coalitions and the other regional interagency groups that the RCP's substantive and operational support is mainly based on (see chart). The first formal meeting of the RCP in Europe and Central Asia, chaired by the UN Deputy

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<sup>1</sup> ECOSOC resolution 2020/23 / General Assembly resolution 74/297

Secretary-General and held in virtual format, will be organized back-to-back with the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region (17-18 March 2021).

Chart: Institutional set-up of RCP-ECA



Europe and Central Asia was the first region to establish Issue-based Coalitions (IBCs). Five of the currently seven Issue-based Coalitions (IBCs) active in the region were established in 2016 as a result of interagency coordination. IBCs are a mechanism to pull together UN system-wide expertise to respond to the identified regional challenges and development issues. The objective of establishing IBCs was to avoid silo-ed approaches considering the indivisibility of the SDGs and to focus the UN system support and engagement on development challenges and issues, not on UN agencies' individual mandates.

Reacting to pressing challenges, the regional UN set up two new IBCs on Sustainable Food Systems and on Environment and Climate Change in 2020, while the existing IBCs are covering social protection; health and well-being; large movements of people, displacement and resilience; gender equality; and youth and adolescents.

As most IBCs in the region were established before the UNDS reform at the regional level, Regional Directors conducted a review of the IBCs in the region in 2020. This was done to ensure that IBCs respond to priorities in the region and are optimally equipped to respond the UNDS reform expectations. The review showed a strong consensus about specific areas where IBCs should be engaged, based on past results and emerging regional and country needs. Following this review, a management response plan was developed, containing clear next steps and deadlines for the implementation of the recommendations.

Other pre-existing groups, such as the Regional Peer Support Group (PSG), which provides substantive support to the UN Country Teams in the region that are guided by a UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), were incorporated under the RCP. To facilitate cooperation and collaboration in the field of digital transformation and

provide support to the regional UN system, a Digital Transformation Group was also established.

### *[Recommendation 2: Establishing a strong regional knowledge management hub](#)*

A regional knowledge management hub is being developed to provide consolidated access to knowledge products and expertise of the regional UN system. Three elements are being considered in this context: knowledge products such as publications, reports or guidelines; expertise of UN staff in the regions; and data management.

Regarding access to knowledge products, cooperation is ongoing with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which has been developing a comprehensive and technologically advanced search tool for UN knowledge products named MANARA. The tool uses artificial intelligence to identify and describe products the user is searching for. The MANARA system will be adapted to the region and rolled out in the course of 2021.

Regarding the expert roster, the RCP expressed its preference for a system in which the IBCs would identify staff members or relevant experts that are available for support and deployment as part of the IBCs' menu of services that are offered, in particular, to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams. This would be limited to an interagency type of support and would not include support requests to individual agencies pertaining to their specific mandates. These support offers will be integrated in the menus of services that are being prepared by the IBCs.

To enhance access to SDG data and related resources and tools, a [Knowledge Hub on Statistics for SDGs](#) was launched by UNECE in December 2019, and a [dashboard and database of SDG indicators](#) were launched in March 2020.

### *[Recommendation 3: Enhancing transparency and results-based management](#)*

The present results report has been prepared in response to this SG recommendation, as highlighted in the introduction, recognizing that it is a transitional report since the RCP was formally established in December 2020. The first annual results report of the RCP will be presented in 2022.

### *[Recommendation 4: Consolidating capacities on data and statistics](#)*

A Regional Coordination Group for Data and Statistics was established in 2020 in response to this recommendation. Overall, the group aims at building a cooperation between the UN at regional and country levels and the intergovernmental sphere, with a strong connection to the statistical processes at the global level.

The group met five times during the year. The outcomes of the group's work are reflected in the section on the results highlights.

### *Recommendation 5: Increasing regional efficiencies through common back offices*

The objective of recommendation 5 is to identify opportunities and leverage structures and capacities that already exist in the system to increase the quality and reduce the costs of operations at the regional level.

A first step at the regional level will be identifying the operational supply and demand. This will be determined following the development of the regional Business Operations Strategy (BOS), which will be driven in 2021 by the Regional Operations Management Team (R-OMT), established in October 2020 and co-chaired by UNDP and UN Women for the next two years (2021-2022).

### **3. Regional challenges, current opportunities and strategic UN response**

#### *a) Main challenges to sustainable development in the region*

Already prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, progress towards the SDGs in the 53 countries of the Europe and Central Asia region, largely consisting of high- and upper-middle-income countries, has been mixed. A common trend across the region has been increasing inequality, as evidenced by a declining labour share of gross domestic product in many countries, and to below 50% and a number of countries, and below average real income growth of the bottom 40%<sup>2</sup>, running counter to the ambition of leaving no one behind. In some cases, the increase in inequality has been accompanied by persistent unemployment, including among young people, and the marginalization of the most vulnerable population groups. Many countries in the region will experience negative population growth over the coming years. Migration flows to and within the region are among the highest globally. The Europe and Central Asia region is home to 144 million international migrants representing close to half of the world's international migrants. The proportion of migrants relative to total population within the region is 8.7%, which is more than twice the world average of 3.5 %. The devastating socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on many parts of the world could further increase the potential for mixed migrant and refugee movements towards the region.

The persistence of gender disparities continues to hold back a faster pace of improvement across multiple goals. For instance, the share of women among managers and local government representatives is close to gender parity in only a few countries in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Unresolved conflicts and political instability represent a major impediment to sustainable development in parts of the region.

Additionally, despite advances, meeting environment-related goals remains yet out of reach for many countries. The overall material footprint per capita is elevated, and biodiversity loss remains an important concern. Progress in reducing CO2 emissions in the region has been

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<sup>2</sup> UNECE, Is the UNECE region on track for 2030?, Assessment, stories and insights, Geneva, 2021, available at: <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/SDG-Report%202021%20Embargo%2015March.pdf>; UNECE, Snapshot Report: SDGs in the UNECE region, Geneva, 2019, available at: [https://unece.org/DAM/RCM\\_Website/RFSD\\_2019\\_SDG\\_Snapshot\\_Report.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/RCM_Website/RFSD_2019_SDG_Snapshot_Report.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> UNECE, Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the UNECE Region, Geneva, 2020, available at: [https://unece.org/DAM/stats/publications/2020/SDG\\_report\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/stats/publications/2020/SDG_report_for_web.pdf).

slow and emissions per capita remain significantly higher than global averages. For example, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fuel combustion per capita in Europe are approximately 60% above world average.

Climate action in the region remains insufficient to combat climate change, and the need to reconcile economic growth with social progress and environmental sustainability is urgent. Moreover, there are nine Landlocked Developing Countries in the region, primarily in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which face special trade and development challenges.

### *b) Impact of COVID-19 pandemic*

Against this background, the unfolding COVID-19 crisis has had drastic negative consequences for people, economies and societies in the region throughout most of the year 2020. It constitutes a major setback across multiple SDGs, reversing development gains and exacerbating adverse trends that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging evidence points to negative impacts in particular on education (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8).

Most immediately, with over 26 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 580,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths in 2020 in the region<sup>4</sup>, the pandemic has affected the lives and health of many people, and has put health systems under extreme pressure.

Moreover, the imposed lockdowns, mobility restrictions and sanitary measures caused a dramatic worsening of the socio-economic situation with large implications for household incomes and employment. The 27 member states of the European Union (EU) are expected to have seen an economic contraction of 7.8 per cent in 2020, and unemployment increasing by almost 1 percentage point to 7.5%, leading to further rising inequality. The pandemic also caused depressed economic activity and widespread disruptions in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, exacerbated by declining remittances and volatile conditions for external financing. The GDP decline for the CIS and Georgia is estimated at 3.4% in 2020, with more negative impacts in some CIS countries caused by lower prices for oil and other commodities. The impact of the pandemic on the countries of South-Eastern Europe has varied, but was adversely affected by the worsening economic situation in the EU, the main destination for its exports and a source of investments and remittances. Countries with high public debt and a significant share of the tourism sector in overall output, including Albania and Montenegro, are expected to have contracted by 6-11 per cent in 2020.

The magnitude of those downturns has depended on a country's economic structure and its capacity to adopt offsetting measures.<sup>5</sup>

The decline in economic activity reflects supply shocks from the disruption of global value chains and demand shocks from reductions in spending on travel, tourism, trade and other sectors.

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<sup>4</sup> Statement by Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, Copenhagen, 7 January 2021, available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/statements/2021/statement-covid-19-a-challenging-start-to-2021,-new-covid-19-variants-and-promising-vaccine-progress>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, [World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021](#), New York.



Despite the recovery expected in 2021, output losses for the region as a whole are expected to be longer-lasting, and progress in advancing the 2030 Agenda is at risk of being derailed. A strong fiscal response was necessary to address the emergency social and health situation and provide an economic stimulus, but it would leave on its trail a massive increase in public debt.

Furthermore, the pandemic and its socio-economic impact have exposed pre-existing weaknesses and systemic inequalities and worsened trends in a number of critical areas for sustainable development:

- Gender equality: The pandemic has intensified inequalities for women and girls in various ways - women are more likely to be front-line health workers; women bear exacerbated burdens of unpaid care work; women are hit harder by the economic downturns because they are more often engaged in short-term, part-time or informal employment; domestic violence increases with restricted mobility; and overstretched health services often divert resources away from services women need.<sup>6</sup>
- Social protection: While a number of countries, including most member states of the European Union (EU), have mature and relatively comprehensive social protection systems in place, there are some important gaps. In other parts of the region, especially in Central Asia, social protection systems face challenges of fragmentation, low levels of public social spending, limited coverage and inadequate benefit levels. Estimates indicate that a little over 85% of the labour force in Europe and Central Asia - representing less than half of the working-age population - is legally covered by social protection, but de facto coverage is considered lower due to practical barriers of access and under-registration. This includes areas such as sickness benefits, unemployment protection or old-age pensions.<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 is exposing critical gaps in social protection coverage that undermine social security.
- Youth: Although children, adolescents and young people seem less vulnerable to the immediate health consequences of COVID-19, they face a number of risks and consequences related to the pandemic, including on their health, education and employment prospects. For instance, youth unemployment in the EU, which represents a serious challenge, increased by 2 percentage points to 17% in 2020.
- Digital access for all: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of Internet connectivity has helped maintain business continuity, keep children in education, and ensured that people in the region can access essential goods and services online. Europe is the region with the highest Internet usage rates worldwide, with over 80% of individuals using the Internet, and still over 70% in the CIS region. However, the pandemic

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<sup>6</sup> UN Regional Issue-based Coalition on Gender Equality, Gender Equality and the COVID-19 Outbreak, 2020, available at: <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2020/04/final%20ibc%20gender%20guidance%20note%20general%20english.pdf?la=en&vs=3842>

<sup>7</sup> UN Regional Issue-based Coalition on Social Protection, COVID-19 and social protection in Europe and Central Asia, 2020, available at: [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/RCM\\_Website/IBCs/Social\\_Protection\\_Brief\\_v1\\_publication.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/RCM_Website/IBCs/Social_Protection_Brief_v1_publication.pdf)

has also exposed significant areas of inequality and exclusion in the digital world, pointing to the need to provide access to information and communication technology for all.

- **Migration, forced displacements and resilience:** The Europe and Central Asia region hosts over 11 million refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum-seekers, refugee returnees and stateless persons, and is home to 57 per cent of the world's international migrants. The region is also a major sender and recipient of international remittances, and Europe and Central Asia are expected to be affected by the steepest drop in remittances worldwide, with inward remittances estimated to fall by 16 percent in 2020. Solutions to the pandemic will therefore need to address the specific vulnerabilities of migrants as well as forcibly displaced populations, including their exposure to high-density living conditions, such as in camp or camp-like settings, exploitative situations, health risks, xenophobia, violence, and lack of access to services. Inclusion of these populations in national response plans as well as maintaining a positive protective environment are equally important.
- **Food:** Against the background of a general need to strengthen sustainable food systems in the Europe and Central Asia region, the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the food supply chains, including through trade restrictions on food and reduced mobility of workers. Increased efforts are needed to ensure that food value chains function well and to promote the production and availability of sustainable, diversified, safe and nutritious food for all.

While the status of SDGs related to people and prosperity has clearly worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some goals related to the environment and climate have been affected positively. Some environmental pressures have abated because of lower economic activity. However, this is a temporary respite that does not reflect policy or structural changes. Looking ahead, the COVID-19 crisis underscores the need to prevent large-scale environmental crises and address vulnerabilities and disaster risks.

#### *c) Opportunities related to a sustainable COVID-19 recovery*

In some areas, the changes that occurred and the measures that were taken in response to COVID-19 may also provide opportunities to strengthen a sustainable recovery and to revive and accelerate SDG progress:

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