



UN REPORT: TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE UNECE REGION

By
Sarah Akram
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

April 10, 2020

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



A recent United Nations report, released on March 13, 2020 titled “Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the UNECE Region” sheds light on the level of progress and also on the challenges faced by the countries in the UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) region.

Since the inception of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which replaced the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) in 2015, countries across the globe have struggled to incorporate and implement the SDG Agenda into their national development agendas. As the year 2020 marks the beginning of the year of concrete results for sustainable development, it can be said that the UNECE region has been ahead of other regions in getting closer to achieving the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda for development cannot be achieved without appropriate figures which help in tracking progress on the desired goals. In all this, it may be seen that relevant data is required for determining and analyzing progress after desired policy actions have been undertaken. The outcomes of policy actions are dependent on the resources which are at the disposal of the said region. There is an indicator framework for the SDGs and the given 232 indicators help in measuring progress. The 68th session of the UNECE held in April, 2019 requested the secretariat to publish a report on the implementation agenda in the UNECE region. This report reviews the advancement and progress by using the chosen indicators under each of the 17 SDGs. However, the SDG indicators have been selected based on relevance of the UNECE region. This is because the region under discussion is a developed region and there is considerable amount of development already as compared to the less developed nations of the world.

It may be noted that the conclusion of individual targets does not apply to entire goals and therefore progress is not regular. The report under discussion analyses the levels and trends of selected SDG indicators relevant for the UNECE countries and also identifies challenges in determining and examining SDGs in the region. This report sheds light on the levels and trends of selected SDG indicators relevant for the UNECE region as a whole and also points out the challenges in monitoring and measuring SDGs in the region. The outcomes are mainly focused on the 49 selected indicators relevant for the region. The present summary refers to the situation and trends at the most wide-ranging level. The findings of the report are summed up through five dimensions, which are peace, prosperity, planet, people and partnership.¹ The findings of the report reveal that there has been good progress in the UNECE countries and the development pertaining to the ending of hunger and poverty is good, and also that everyone in the region is able to fulfill their possible potential in a very conducive environment. Fortunately, there is no extreme poverty in the region, which is a very encouraging sign.

The region is better off in the sense that there are no underweight children, which shows that nourishment is adequate and for the benefit of senior citizens, there are social protection schemes which also give a cover to people with disabilities. The child, infant and maternal mortality are also far below the global SDG targets. The progress in education has been satisfactory and so is gender empowerment in the region. Coming to the planet, the UNECE countries have made adequate progress in several realms. This comes under the ambit of protecting the planet and countries in the region have been front runners as the protection of key biodiversity as well as forest cover in these countries is also good and has witnessed a net increase of 28 million between the years 2000 and 2015.² Among others, safely managed sanitation services are also available in these countries with ongoing improvements throughout the years.

As far as the energy front is concerned, the countries in the region are becoming more energy efficient, and have improved in terms of using less energy. Therefore, it can be said that among other spheres with regards to the planet, these countries are way ahead in water quality, environmental agreements and do not face water scarcity as such. The UNECE countries have progressed on several fronts and one of the important areas have been stable economic growth as well as a growth in expenditure in research and development and also an improvement in the high tech industry in the shape of more internet users and increasing subscriptions of the internet. There have been improvements and stability on other fronts as well, for example, there is a reduction in

¹ UN Report: Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the UNECE Region, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, P.10,
https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/2020/SDG_report_for_web.pdf

² Ibid. P. 11

homicide victims and also there is a reduction in the number of un-sentenced detainees, which is a very pleasant development.

This report, the first of its kind on the SDGs is very timely and comes out at the time of the review of the 2030 Agenda as it gives an adequate insight into the level of improvement for the selected indicators, which are most relevant for the region. Overall, the UNECE countries are achieving targets and making noteworthy progress in areas related to its populations as well as the environment. The 2030 Agenda cannot be fulfilled unless there are adequate statistics to track progress. Therefore, the report is an important contribution as it helps in identifying progress, as well as it reiterates the importance of investing in data collection as a forerunner to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is very likely to have a significant impact on the economies of the UNECE countries and thus also affect the path to progress in terms of achieving the SDGs. Since the region is so tightly integrated socially and economically, the blow to the economies due to COVID-19 is very much likely to see the countries in the UNECE region have larger budget deficits, which will resultantly affect their social development programs as well as create severe budgetary strains. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the global economy could shrink by almost one percent in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ The new report therefore may need to be reformulated in the light of COVID-19 and its after effects.

³ COVID-19 likely to shrink global GDP by almost one per cent in 2020
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2020/04/covid-19-likely-to-shrink-global-gdp-by-almost-one-per-cent-in-2020/> UN.org