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ECE REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM

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POSITION PAPER

Towards a Rights-Based, Inclusive, and Accountable Sustainable Development Agenda

Submitted to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF 2026)
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Prepared by the ECE Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (ECE-RCEM), representing civil society organisations from 17 constituencies across the UNECE region, including Europe, North America, and Central Asia.

Executive Summary

Regional disparities continue to affect progress across sustainable development in the UNECE region for the SDGs under review. Progress is challenged by structural inequalities, conflicts and migration, financing gaps, infrastructure deficits, and shrinking civic space. Civil society organisations across the region pioneer locally grounded, rights-based solutions and inclusive partnerships to accelerate progress. This paper reflects civil society perspectives, highlighting shared challenges, emerging trends, and inclusive and participatory priority areas for SDG implementation, which respond to the rights and needs of local communities.

SDG 6 — Clean Water and Sanitation

Significant disparities persist in rural and Roma communities in accessing safe drinking water and adequate wastewater treatment. Ageing infrastructure and small hydropower projects cause additional challenges. The impact of climate change — including increasing drought frequency and seasonal water shortages — is also a growing concern. Menstrual poverty affects many girls and women who are unable to afford menstrual products, with inadequate WASH facilities in schools and workplaces. Civil society calls for investment in climate-resilient, modernised water infrastructures.

SDG 7 — Affordable and Clean Energy

Energy poverty affects already vulnerable households disproportionately, particularly through rising electricity prices and inefficient housing stock. Age, disability, and gender-responsive Just Transition measures related to energy in national climate plans are required, with the participation of all social partners — including young and older people and civil society organisations — in accordance with ILO guidelines. Hydropower and solar projects should be developed with community consultation and environmental safeguards for energy-efficient public buildings.

SDG 9 — Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Mining related to metallic ores is linked to water contamination, land degradation, and land grabbing that exclude and impoverish local communities. Infrastructure and industrial development strategies often fail to integrate human rights and environmental justice principles. Civil society calls for stronger regulatory enforcement, transparent impact assessments, and minimum living wages with equal pay for work of equal value.

SDG 11 — Sustainable Cities and Communities

Age, disability, and gender-responsive investments are needed in local, quality public services for all, with meaningful involvement of young and older people and civil society that reaches families and hard-to-reach communities.

SDG 17 — Partnerships for the Goals

Investing in institutional transparency, meaningful inclusion of civil society in policymaking and partnerships, and dedicated civil society funding is required. Civil society calls for structured, transparent, and inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogue and for the protection of civic space across the region.

Introduction: A Critical Moment for Multilateralism and Civil Society

The 2026 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF 2026) convenes at a moment of compounding global crises. With only four years remaining until the 2030 deadline, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals has stalled or reversed across much of the UNECE region and beyond. Rising geopolitical tensions, democratic regression, the growing concentration of economic and digital power, fiscal pressure on multilateral institutions, and an accelerating climate emergency are forces that, individually, test the implementation and resilience of the 2030 Agenda. Together, they constitute a systemic challenge to the values and structures upon which sustainable development depends.

Against this backdrop, the ECE Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (ECE-RCEM) — representing civil society organisations from 17 constituencies across Europe, North America, and Central Asia — has developed this position paper ahead of HLPF 2026. We do so in the firm belief that civil society is not a peripheral voice in these debates but, as one colleague has aptly observed, 'the oxygen of the UN' — sustaining cross-border cooperation, accountability, and the grounding of global processes in lived human realities.

This paper addresses the SDGs under review at HLPF 2026 — SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11, and 17 — alongside two cross-cutting themes of urgent relevance: the need to move beyond GDP as the primary metric of progress, and the implications of the UN80 reform process for civil society's future role in the multilateral system. These themes are deeply interconnected. Meaningful progress on the SDGs is impossible without inclusive governance, accountable institutions, and a conception of prosperity that extends beyond economic growth to ground development in human rights, ecological limits, and social well-being.

ECE-RCEM brings to this forum the perspectives of communities too often absent from global policy chambers — older persons and youth, rural communities, Roma and Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, LGBTI people, migrants, women and girls, workers and their representatives. Their voices do not supplement the technical analysis presented here; they are its foundation.

> *"Partnerships are not only about mobilising resources — they are about power, trust, and shared responsibility. Today, those principles are under strain."*

The structure of this paper follows the SDGs under review, before addressing the cross-cutting themes of Beyond GDP and UN80 reform. Each section identifies the key challenges observed across the UNECE region, draws on civil society testimony and direct engagement at the RFSD 2025 and related processes, and sets out concrete recommendations for Member States, UN entities, and other stakeholders.

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation — Rights, Quality, and the Politics of Exclusion

State of Play

The UNECE region has made measurable advances in access to water and sanitation. Yet headline figures mask a deeper and more troubling reality: water quality is deteriorating, affordability is declining for many households, and the governance structures meant to safeguard this fundamental human right are under strain. Progress, where it exists, is profoundly unequal.

Across the region, water may be 'available' on paper while people lack the infrastructure, control, or safe services to benefit from it. Agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, fertilisers, microplastics, and inadequately treated wastewater are degrading rivers, aquifers, and coastlines. Ageing infrastructure — compounded in some areas by the disruptions caused by poorly designed small hydropower projects — is failing communities whose systems have not been modernised. These are not only environmental problems: polluted water threatens livelihoods — including fishing communities whose access to usable waters is being extinguished — and undermines public health in ways that compound existing inequalities.

The climate dimension is sharpening. Increasing drought frequency and seasonal water shortages are placing communities and ecosystems under pressure that existing water governance frameworks were not designed to manage. Civil society calls for investment in climate-resilient, modernised water infrastructure as an urgent priority.

Conflict is an accelerating risk. From Ukraine to other theatres of violence, water and sanitation systems are being attacked, disrupted, and weaponised. This violates international humanitarian law and transforms the human right to safe water into a crisis variable. It also undermines the cross-border cooperation on shared waters — around seas, rivers, and lakes — that sustainable water management requires.

Who Is Being Left Behind

SDG 6 will not be met without confronting the compounded exclusion experienced by the most marginalised. Roma communities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants, people experiencing homelessness, older people, people with disabilities and LGBTI people who depend on accessible public sanitation continue to face barriers rooted not in resource scarcity but in discrimination, access and structural neglect. The shift towards pay-to-use public facilities and the absence of safe, accessible 24-hour public toilets in many urban environments is a dignity failure with serious public health consequences.

Menstrual health and hygiene remain systematically absent from SDG 6 implementation. Menstrual poverty affects many girls and women who are unable to afford essential products, with inadequate WASH facilities in schools and workplaces compounding the barriers they face. Information, products, and safe sanitation are essential services — not optional add-ons — and their omission from water governance frameworks reflects an enduring gender blind spot that must be corrected.

When water systems are privatised without robust regulation, profit frequently takes precedence over the public good. Ageing infrastructure deteriorates; accountability is diffused; costs fall on communities least able to bear them. Safe water is a human right and a public good. Member States remain duty-bearers even when services are contracted out.

Civil Society Recommendations on SDG 6

- Centre water quality and wastewater treatment: enforce regulation on agricultural and industrial pollution, address plastics and microplastics at source, and invest in monitoring and treatment infrastructure.
- Protect SDG 6 in humanitarian response: treat WASH measures as core life-saving priorities; provide explicit legal and political protection to civilian water infrastructure under international humanitarian law.
- End the normalisation of exclusion: guarantee access to safe sanitation for all marginalised groups, invest in accessible 24-hour public facilities, and fund menstrual health programmes as part of basic sanitation provision.
- Strengthen public governance: audit and review privatised water systems; establish transparent, rights-based regulatory frameworks with meaningful civil society oversight.
- Rebuild cooperation on shared waters: reinvest in transboundary water governance, recognising that water insecurity does not stop at national borders.

SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy — Justice, Power, and the Terms of Transition

State of Play

Renewable energy deployment is accelerating across the UNECE region, but the energy transition is not automatically a just one. Civil society's central observation is that the question of energy is not only about scaling technologies — it is about power: who controls energy systems, who benefits from them, and who is left behind in their transformation.

Energy and geopolitics are inseparable. Energy infrastructure is targeted in conflict; access is disrupted; and resources are wielded as tools of political leverage. These realities directly undermine progress on SDG 7 and remind us that sustainable development cannot be decoupled from peace and respect for international law.

Energy poverty remains a structural feature of the region, not an anomaly. Approximately 42 million people across Europe cannot keep their homes adequately warm in winter. Women bear a disproportionate burden of energy poverty due to income gaps, care responsibilities, and unequal access to resources. Without addressing these root inequalities, the benefits of the energy transition will not reach those who need them most. Age, disability, and gender-responsive Just Transition measures must be embedded in national climate and energy plans, with the meaningful participation of all social partners — including young and older people and civil society organisations — in accordance with ILO guidelines.

Hydropower and solar projects, while essential to the transition, must be developed with genuine community consultation and rigorous environmental safeguards. Energy-efficient public buildings present an underutilised opportunity to deliver co-benefits across energy, housing, and social equity — but realising this potential requires public investment and community-centred planning.

Emerging Challenges

The rise of 'petrol populism' — using energy price shocks to justify continued fossil fuel dependence and new subsidies — represents a real and growing political threat to climate ambition. Governments under pressure from conflict-driven price increases are being tempted towards short-term decisions with long-term costs. Civil society calls for steadiness of commitment and robust public communication grounded in evidence and justice.

Large-scale renewable energy projects can, if poorly governed, reproduce extractive patterns. Communities are displaced, environmental assessments are compressed under fast-track procedures, and people defending their land and livelihoods face pressure, intimidation, and inadequate legal protection. This is not a marginal concern: it reflects a structural risk inherent in any transition that prioritises speed over rights.

Artificial intelligence and data infrastructure represent a fast-growing and under-regulated driver of energy demand. Data centres consume substantial electricity and water — often in regions already facing resource scarcity. Where such projects are sited on or near Indigenous territories without free, prior, and informed consent, they risk compounding historical injustices. A just energy transition must ensure that the digital economy's appetite for energy does not come at the expense of Indigenous, rural, and other marginalised communities.

Civil Society Recommendations on SDG 7

- Invest in decentralised, community-led energy systems that build trust, improve access, and ensure that transition benefits are shared locally.
- End fossil fuel subsidies and reform energy pricing to reflect social and environmental realities, with explicit protections for low-income households.
- Ensure meaningful participation: communities must be engaged from the outset of renewable energy planning — not after decisions have been made. Civic space must be protected; rights defenders must be safe.
- Establish enforceable human rights standards for renewable energy projects, including requirements for environmental and social impact assessment, fair benefit-sharing, and the right to free, prior, and informed consent.
- Align energy policy with ecological limits: sustainability encompasses biodiversity, land systems, water, and planetary boundaries — not only carbon emissions.

SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure — Governance, Inclusion, and the Digital Divide

State of Play

Achieving SDG 9 requires not only investment — it requires governance systems that are transparent, accountable, and people-centred. Without that, neither infrastructure nor innovation can serve the public good. Civil society's engagement with SDG 9 this year centres on two interconnected domains: the governance of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in infrastructure financing, and the challenge of closing the digital divide while ensuring that technological innovation serves people rather than displacing or surveilling them.

Public-Private Partnerships: Opportunity and Risk

PPPs are a critical tool for financing infrastructure and driving innovation in contexts of constrained public budgets. However, evidence from across the UNECE region reveals persistent governance failures: regulatory frameworks are too often fragmented and opaque; fiscal risks fall disproportionately on communities when projects fail; human and labour rights compliance remains weak; and over-dependence on a small number of large actors in critical sectors creates systemic vulnerability.

Civil society does not oppose PPPs. We insist that they be properly governed. This means transparent, standardised frameworks open to public scrutiny; binding mechanisms to ensure equitable benefit-sharing with affected communities; strong enforcement of human and labour

rights standards; robust anti-corruption safeguards; and deliberate diversification of partnerships to reduce systemic dependency.

Extractive Industries: Mining, Rights, and Environmental Justice

A significant and under-addressed dimension of SDG 9 in the UNECE region is the impact of mining — particularly metallic ore extraction — on local communities and ecosystems. Mining operations are linked to water contamination, land degradation, and land grabbing that exclude and impoverish the communities most directly affected. Infrastructure and industrial development strategies too often fail to integrate human rights and environmental justice principles from the outset, treating rights-based assessment as a post-hoc compliance exercise rather than a design requirement.

Civil society calls for stronger regulatory enforcement, fully transparent and participatory impact assessments, and labour standards that guarantee minimum living wages and equal pay for work of equal value. These are not optional additions to an economic development agenda — they are preconditions for development that is genuinely sustainable.

Innovation is accelerating, but governance is not keeping pace. Regulatory gaps around autonomous systems, platform-based services, and artificial intelligence create fragmentation and unmanaged risk. The digital divide is deepening — excluding rural populations, older persons, persons with disabilities, and low-income groups — while workers face displacement and precarious conditions without adequate rights or protection. Data privacy and surveillance concerns are growing across the region.

Universal access to digital tools cannot be separated from digital literacy. Infrastructure without capacity creates dependency without empowerment. Public investment in education, reskilling, and targeted outreach — particularly for ageing, rural, and low-income populations — must be treated as a core component of SDG 9 implementation.

Civil Society Recommendations on SDG 9

- Establish coherent national regulatory frameworks for emerging technologies — including AI — that embed human oversight, provide for democratic accountability, and allow local adaptability.
- Guarantee universal access to digital tools and in-person training as part of public services, with explicit priority for marginalised groups.
- Adopt lifelong learning as a core component of just transition strategies for workers facing technological displacement.
- Mandate robust data governance and rigorous risk assessment as preconditions for technological deployment in public systems.
- Strengthen regulatory enforcement and require fully transparent, participatory environmental and social impact assessments for all extractive and large infrastructure projects — with genuine community consent, not consultation after decisions are made.
- Guarantee minimum living wages and equal pay for work of equal value across all infrastructure and industrial development contracts, including in supply chains.
- Build genuine civil society participation into SDG 9 governance frameworks — not as an afterthought, but as a structural requirement.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities — Housing Justice, Mobility, and Inclusive Urbanism

Housing Justice as a Foundation for Just Transition

There is no just transition without housing justice. Across the UNECE region, housing continues to be treated primarily as a financial asset rather than a fundamental human right and a foundational pillar of equitable development. This has produced deepening inequalities: a persistent shortage of social and affordable housing, rising rents, growing tenure insecurity, and households bearing the compounded pressures of climate, economic, and social change.

Informal settlements are not temporary anomalies but structural outcomes of exclusion. They are disproportionately home to Roma communities, migrants, and other marginalised groups who face insecure tenure, limited access to services, and exposure to forced eviction. These conditions are incompatible with any credible conception of just urban transition.

Climate adaptation, energy efficiency retrofitting, and urban redevelopment programmes risk deepening existing inequalities if they are not explicitly designed to prevent displacement and ensure that their benefits reach those in greatest need. Housing policy that fails to account for demographic change, intersecting vulnerabilities, and the climate emergency is not merely inadequate — it actively reproduces the injustices it claims to address.

Solutions exist and are well-documented. Finland's Housing First approach demonstrates that homelessness can be substantially reduced through sustained public investment and rights-based frameworks. Cooperative and community-led housing models across the region demonstrate that affordability, inclusion, and sustainability can be achieved together. The challenge is not identifying what works — it is scaling and financing it, and embedding it within a just transition framework.

Sustainable Urban Mobility and Road Safety

How people move through their cities is inseparable from whether those cities are just, inclusive, and resilient. Transport systems across the region continue to fall short for those who need them most: persons with disabilities, older persons, children, women, low-income households, and marginalised communities face daily barriers as a structural norm rather than an exception.

Aggregated data on transport routinely masks these inequalities. Civil society calls for disaggregated indicators — by gender, age, disability, and income — that reveal who is genuinely served by urban mobility systems and who is not. Civil society organisations, many of which gather granular lived-experience data that official systems cannot replicate, should be recognised and resourced as partners in this evidence base.

Transport is among the largest contributors to urban air pollution, and its burdens fall disproportionately on low-income communities. Climate and emissions strategies that displace costs onto vulnerable communities must be resisted: sustainable mobility and social equity are not competing goals but mutually reinforcing ones.

Civil Society Recommendations on SDG 11

- Anchor housing policy in the recognition of housing as a human right: strengthen tenant protections, adopt anti-displacement measures, and effectively regulate speculative markets.
- Invest in social and affordable housing as a core component of just transition planning, with long-term financing that integrates social equity, climate resilience, and energy efficiency.
- Disaggregate transport data by gender, age, disability, and income — and resource civil society to contribute to that evidence base.
- Integrate transport with housing, health, and social services planning; embed participatory governance as a structural requirement, not an exception.
- Pair climate and emissions strategies with affordability protections, ensuring that sustainable mobility does not impose disproportionate costs on those least able to bear them.

- Adopt Safe Systems and Vision Zero approaches across the region, with meaningful community engagement built into their design and evaluation from the outset.
- Ensure the meaningful participation of affected communities — including those most impacted by displacement, poverty, and systemic exclusion — in all housing and urban transformation processes.
- Direct investment in local, quality public services that are age, disability, and gender-responsive — and that actively reach families and hard-to-reach communities rather than assuming universal access.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals — Digital Transformation, Power, and Accountability

Digital Transformation Is Not Neutral

SDG 17 reminds us that partnerships are not only about mobilising resources — they are about power, trust, and shared responsibility. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the domain of digital transformation, where the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure, platforms, and data systems is reshaping economic, political, and social life across the UNECE region and far beyond.

The ECE-RCEM civil society mechanism draws attention to five structural challenges that must be addressed if digital transformation is to advance the 2030 Agenda rather than deepen its contradictions.

Five Structural Challenges

First, the digital divide is not only about connectivity — it is about exclusion. Older populations, rural communities, and socially and economically marginalised people are not being prioritised in digital expansion. When digital public services replace physical ones without adequate safeguards, exclusion becomes structural: people lose access to banking, healthcare, and even their rights. The shift to digital is not inherently progressive; without intentional design, it compounds disadvantage.

Second, digital ecosystems are characterised by a growing concentration of power. A significant share of digital infrastructure, platforms, and data is controlled by a small number of private actors, largely headquartered in the Global North. This creates dependency — particularly for countries of the Global South — and raises a fundamental question about the beneficiaries of digital transformation. Too often, the answer is not communities but profit-driven models that extract data without accountability. Many remain disconnected not because solutions are unavailable, but because they are not deemed 'profitable users.'

Third, the UNECE region is witnessing an alarming erosion of digital rights and civic space. In restrictive environments, digital tools no longer enable participation — they enable surveillance. Entire populations are being channelled onto state-controlled platforms where privacy is absent and dissent carries consequences. Disinformation campaigns, algorithmic manipulation, and interference in electoral processes are undermining democratic systems across borders.

Fourth, the risks of artificial intelligence are accelerating faster than governance frameworks can respond. AI is already being used in conflict settings — not to protect civilians but to identify and target them. AI-driven systems are shaping labour markets, often without social protection, transparency, or human oversight. We cannot allow a future where decisions about people's livelihoods, rights, and safety are made by opaque algorithms without accountability.

Fifth, the environmental cost of digitalisation cannot be ignored. Data centres consume vast amounts of water and energy, often in regions already facing resource scarcity. Without

adherence to sustainability standards, digital transformation may undermine climate goals rather than support them.

Civil Society Recommendations on SDG 17

- Build inclusive regulatory frameworks: ensure that digital and AI systems are human-centred, rights-based, and transparent. This includes binding accountability mechanisms for technology companies and clear standards aligned with international law.
- Invest in capacity and inclusion: digital access must be paired with digital and AI literacy for all ages and abilities, with public investment in education, reskilling, and outreach for marginalised groups.
- Protect civic space and independent media: civil society actors working on digital rights, disinformation, and accountability must be supported — not restricted. Partnerships cannot function where civic space is shrinking.
- Strengthen multi-stakeholder dialogue: move beyond consultation to co-creation. Civil society, workers, and communities must have a genuine seat at the table in shaping digital policies at national and global levels.
- Ensure ethical and sustainable innovation: digital solutions must align with environmental sustainability and social well-being — not only efficiency and growth.
- Establish and protect dedicated civil society funding mechanisms, recognising that meaningful participation in policymaking and multi-stakeholder partnerships requires adequate and independent resourcing.

> *"Trust cannot be assumed — it must be built through transparency, accountability, and inclusion. If we fail to act, digital transformation will reinforce divides. If we succeed, it can become a powerful tool for equity, participation, and human dignity."*

Beyond GDP: Towards a Well-Being Economy Rooted in Rights and Planetary Limits

Why Progress Must Be Redefined

Civil society, together with a growing number of academic institutions and socially committed business actors, calls for a fundamental rethinking of how progress and prosperity are measured and governed. The case for moving beyond GDP is not merely technical — it is ethical and political. As long as GDP remains the dominant metric of success, public policy will be oriented towards economic growth regardless of its social distribution, its human rights implications, or its ecological consequences.

The evidence for the inadequacy of growth-centred frameworks is now overwhelming. Seven of the nine planetary boundaries have been crossed. Human rights violations are systemic and daily. Poverty persists at scale while wealth concentrates at the top. The 'make the pie bigger so more people will eat' approach has not worked and is actively driving harm — from fossil-fuel-driven conflicts to the rewarding of investment in militarisation. We have entered a new era of global inequality and imperial accumulation. This is not inevitable. It is the consequence of policy choices, and change demands different choices.

Connecting Beyond GDP to the 2030 Agenda

Civil society welcomes the recognition in the Pact for the Future (Action 53) of Beyond GDP as an important factor in SDG success. We welcome growing international momentum around alternative metrics and frameworks. However, we caution against Beyond GDP becoming yet another parallel framework generating more reporting without changing the underlying logic of decision-making.

For Beyond GDP to be transformative, its indicators and metrics must be explicitly linked to budget and policy-making processes, accountability mechanisms, and human rights obligations. They must be integrated into the 2030 Agenda rather than floating alongside it. The Donut Economics model offers a compelling frame: rather than relying on the traditional three pillars of sustainable development, it focuses on social and environmental values, treating economics as a tool in service of people and planet — not an end in itself. The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty's roadmap for fighting poverty beyond growth similarly recommends a transformation to a human rights economy, which we fully endorse.

Requirements for an Inclusive Process

The development of Beyond GDP frameworks must not become a technical exercise conducted by experts and delivered to communities. It requires an inclusive dialogue involving civil society, academia, and businesses committed to the 2030 Agenda, including the use of participatory processes such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and citizen-generated data. Without this, new metrics will fail to build the trust and shared narrative around prosperity and progress that are prerequisites for their political adoption and public legitimacy.

We also insist that Beyond GDP conversations cannot proceed without addressing historical responsibilities and negative spillovers: richer countries' disproportionate contribution to the global environmental and social crises that now threaten the most vulnerable. Debt relief and international financial reform are integral to any serious Beyond GDP agenda.

Civil Society Recommendations on Beyond GDP

- Adopt Beyond GDP frameworks that are explicitly linked to human rights obligations, planetary boundaries, and the 2030 Agenda — not developed in parallel.
- Ensure that new metrics are integrated into budget and policy-making processes and accountability mechanisms at national and international levels.
- Create inclusive, participatory processes for developing and validating new indicators, including civil society, affected communities, and citizen-generated data.
- Recognise well-being economy principles — ensuring that care, social protection, and the rights of all to health, education, housing, and dignity — as the framework for work beyond 2030.
- Address historical responsibilities, negative spillovers, and debt relief as integral components of any genuine Beyond GDP agenda.

UN80 Reform and the Future of Civil Society Engagement

A Reform Moment Shaped by Crisis

The UN80 initiative — expected to affect more than 40 UN entities, funds, and programmes — is unfolding in a context of overlapping pressures: a deepening financial crisis within the UN system, growing geopolitical tensions, and shrinking civic space across many countries of the UNECE region. Against this backdrop, civil society must engage actively, critically, and constructively with the reform process.

ECE-RCEM recognises that reform is necessary. The multilateral system must adapt to a rapidly changing world. But reform cannot be an alibi for austerity, and efficiency cannot be

used to hollow out the very functions — human rights mechanisms, civil society engagement, participatory governance — that give the UN its legitimacy and effectiveness. As Birgit Kainz-Labbe of OHCHR's Civic Space Unit observed at our April 2025 side event: 'The UN Charter and human rights obligations must remain central to any reform.'

Three specific risks require particular vigilance. First, potential staff reductions of up to 20% risk disproportionately affecting stakeholder engagement functions, which are among the first to be constrained under fiscal pressure. Second, proposals to reduce reporting by Special Procedures to the General Assembly would diminish one of the few mechanisms through which independent experts bring human rights violations to the attention of the full UN membership — reducing visibility, accountability, and leverage for justice. Third, the chronic underfunding of the UN's human rights pillar — which accounts for approximately 1% of overall UN resources — creates the conditions in which efficiency-driven reforms cause the greatest harm.

The Proposed UN Women–UNFPA Merger

Civil society organisations and feminist networks from across regions have raised serious concerns regarding the proposed merger of UN Women and UNFPA under the UN80 reform process. Feminist coalitions have warned that the proposal is advancing despite the absence of a transparent, evidence-based justification, meaningful consultation with civil society, or robust analysis of the political and operational risks involved.[1]

The Feminist Cross-Coalition on UN80 has highlighted that UN Women and UNFPA have distinct and complementary mandates, with limited overlap in their functions. Rather than strengthening the UN system, a merger risks weakening global capacity on gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) at a time when these agendas are already facing coordinated backlash and defunding pressures.[2]

Civil society organisations have further noted that the merger assessment and accompanying proposals fail to provide convincing evidence that restructuring would improve outcomes or generate meaningful savings. Independent analysis commissioned by the Feminist Cross-Coalition found that projected savings remain unverified, while transition costs could reach USD 56–110 million and divert resources away from programmes and frontline services.[3]

Feminist advocates, including former members of the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign that helped establish UN Women, have also cautioned that the creation of UN Women should not be used as a precedent for merging UN Women and UNFPA. They stress that the mandates were previously considered distinct and complementary, and that the current geopolitical context — marked by escalating attacks on gender equality, SRHR, and LGBTQI+ rights — makes structural experimentation particularly risky.[4]

Civil society therefore calls on Member States to prioritise transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation in all UN80 reform discussions. Rather than weakening the UN's gender architecture through rushed restructuring, Member States should focus on strengthening mandates, safeguarding funding for gender equality and SRHR, and ensuring that reform processes do not undermine decades of hard-won normative gains.

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[1] Feminist Cross-Coalition UN80 Working Group. (2026). *What is the UNFPA/UN Women merger proposal? The importance of the agencies to the gender architecture, impacts and risks of a merger*.

[2] Feminist Cross-Coalition UN80 Working Group. (2026). *What is the UNFPA/UN Women merger proposal? The importance of the agencies to the gender architecture, impacts and risks of a merger*

[3] McGovern, T., Bencomo, C., & Babbar, K. (2026). *UNFPA-UN Women merger cost benefit analysis: Plain language summary*. Feminist Cross-Coalition UN80 Working Group & CUNY SPH Sexual and Reproductive Justice Hub.

[4] Former members of the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign. (2026). *The creation of UN Women is not an institutional precedent for merging UN Women and UNFPA*.

A Fragmented Region, Uneven Participation

The UNECE region is not monolithic. Civic space varies profoundly — from countries with strong participatory traditions to contexts of increasing restriction, surveillance, and repression. Regional processes are often shaped by Global North perspectives, yet the region itself plays a disproportionate role in shaping global political narratives, including in the context of the current authoritarian resurgence documented in the V-Dem Democracy Report 2026. Civil society from the most restricted parts of the region is the most vulnerable — and the most essential — voice in these debates.

ECE-RCEM will become increasingly important in a more regionalised UN system. We call on civil society organisations across the region to invest in coordination, to 'get information systems back on track,' and to be strongly present in debates on AI governance, the post-2030 agenda, and the evolution of multilateral institutions.

Civil Society Recommendations on UN80

- Ensure that human rights and meaningful civil society participation are treated as foundational principles of UN reform — not secondary considerations to be balanced against efficiency.
- Protect the integrity and independence of the human rights pillar, including Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review, and treaty bodies, and resist any reforms that reduce their resources, access, or reporting capacity.
- Provide greater transparency in the UN80 process, including the 31 Work Packages under the internal reform workstream, and create genuine opportunities for civil society input and co-creation.
- Protect existing gender equality mandates and ensure that any restructuring of the UN's gender architecture is Member State-led, evidence-based, and explicitly safeguards commitments on gender equality and SRHR.
- Revitalise the UnMute Civil Society initiative and strengthen pathways for CSO participation across all UN entities.
- Invest in digital inclusion, equity, and security as prerequisites for meaningful civil society participation in an increasingly virtual multilateral system.

Conclusion: The Courage to Change

The convergence of crises facing the world in 2026 — climate breakdown, democratic regression, digital concentration, geopolitical fragmentation, and the unravelling of multilateral institutions — demands more than technical adjustment. It demands structural transformation grounded in courage, solidarity, and a genuine commitment to human rights and planetary survival.

Across every SDG under review at this HLPF — on water, energy, infrastructure, cities, and partnerships — civil society has identified a common pattern: the gap between declared commitments and lived realities is widening, and the communities bearing the greatest cost of that gap are those least present in the rooms where decisions are made. This is not a problem of insufficient data or inadequate frameworks. It is a problem of power.

ECE-RCEM does not come to HLPF 2026 simply to register concern. We come with recommendations grounded in evidence, tested in practice, and shaped by the communities for whom sustainable development is not an abstraction but a question of survival. We call on Member States and UN entities to:

- Place human rights and dignity — not efficiency or economic growth — at the centre of every reform and every SDG review.

- Create genuinely inclusive governance processes that move from consultation to co-creation, ensuring that those most affected by global challenges help shape the solutions.
- Protect the institutional infrastructure — multilateral bodies, civil society mechanisms, independent human rights systems — that makes accountability possible.
- Adopt the metrics, frameworks, and financing instruments of a well-being economy, aligning development trajectories with planetary limits and human rights.
- Resist the pressure to treat austerity as reform, efficiency as accountability, or restructuring as progress, where these formulations mask the narrowing of rights and the shrinking of democratic space.

The promise of the 2030 Agenda — 'leave no one behind' — cannot be fulfilled without leaving no voice behind. Civil society stands ready to partner in that work and to participate within a system where partnerships are truly inclusive, rights-based, and accountable.

> *"This is not only a moment to defend existing gains — it is a moment to rethink how civil society inspires, organises, and works together in a rapidly changing world."*

ECE-RCEM calls on all stakeholders gathered at HLPF 2026 to act with the urgency, ambition, and courage that this moment demands.

ECE Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (ECE-RCEM)

Representing 17 constituencies across Europe, North America and Central Asia

Submitted to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, July 2026

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