



UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development  
**Plenary Session & Closing**

3 April 2025, Geneva

**Guiding question:** *“How can we accelerate SDG progress in challenging times with priority shifts and strained multilateral cooperation? What barriers are there for civil society, and how can MS and UN better support civil society?”*

---

Distinguished delegates,

My name is Yara Bon from WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform. Today, I am speaking on behalf of the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism to share our closing statement.

Let me start with sharing about the challenging times before going into the challenge of each of the SDGs under review during this Forum. And the barriers there are for civil society and how Member States and the UN can support.

We are living through what many are now calling a time of polycrisis. From the post-COVID-19 pandemic, to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to the climate catastrophe and the genocide in Palestine, to economic and energy crises — all of this is happening against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism, erosion of democracy, unprecedented funding cuts shrinking civic space for civil society, disinformation and pressure on fundamental rights and freedom of assembly.

In our region, feminist, LGBTI, and environmental movements have been hit the hardest.

And yet — we are still here. We are mobilising, we are building new coalitions, we are **Holding the Line**.

And that is what gives us hope.

It gives us hope that despite all odds, this Forum saw strong CSO participation. It gives us hope that Member States from our region are still pushing for **progressive legislation**. And yes — it gives us hope that this space, this Forum, still exists, and that we are speaking honestly and sharing our experiences.

It gives us hope that today, the European Court of Human Rights ruled to uphold the demonstration rights of the Extinction Rebellion and that the Human Rights Council adopted the resolution to begin the drafting of the convention for the rights of older persons.

It gives us hope that in these difficult times, we are not giving up on multilateralism. **We are not giving up on each other.**

We were reminded by the President of ECOSOC that climate change and gender inequality are not opinions. **They are facts.** And yet, too many governments treat them as optional debates.

What worries us most is the growing trend of transactional diplomacy — a diplomacy that turns away from accountability and towards the interests of oligarchs, non-democratic and fascist regimes.

We are alarmed by the state capture of institutions, the rise of Foreign Agent laws that muzzle civil society, and the weakening of legal avenues for redress and demonstrations. We were shocked to learn that Hungary will withdraw from the International Criminal Court.

Hope is still alive. **We will not stay silent.** Most of the rights we have today were not given — they were **won.**

Civil society is not a threat to democracy. We are proof it exists. You may burn the forest and pour concrete over the soil — but we will be the cracks where life returns.

### **On SDG 3:**

We want to acknowledge progress made on universal health coverage and ageing. But critical voices are still missing — especially LGBTI communities, who face higher rates of suicide, homelessness, and discrimination in care systems. Migrants, who form the backbone of our care economy, are still stigmatised and too often left out.

We agree with the life-course approach to health — one that includes mental health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, digital literacy and access for older people, gender-sensitive and migrant-inclusive services, and equitable and affordable access to health professionals. Health is not a commodity. **It is a human right.**

A study published in 2025 found that the passage of anti-LGBTI resolutions increased total suicide attempts by 16.5% per 100,000 individuals, highlighting the severe mental health impact of discriminatory policies. Such impact is exacerbated by the lack of transgender healthcare. This data underscores what our communities already know — **exclusion kills.**

### **On SDG 5:**

Feminist and LGBTI movements are on the frontlines of **the fight for democracy**. They are being criminalised, imprisoned, defunded. Even denied access to rights because of the binary interpretation of sexes.

Intersectionality remains a buzzword in this space — used often, but rarely applied.

We cannot talk about public participation and leadership without talking about the sticky floors — the structural barriers that keep migrant, racialised, LGBTI and working-class people from even entering the room.

We cannot talk about gender equality without naming the rise of white supremacy, climate denialism, and colonialism – something this region bears responsibility for.

While we welcome commitments to women and girls, we call on Member States to move beyond binary thinking. Gender-diverse people are systematically excluded from healthcare, housing, education, and data. **This must end.**

We demand inclusive language and intersectional data that reflects lived realities.

#### **On SDG 8:**

Let us be honest. This very institution does not pay its interns — a practice that contradicts the values of SDG 8 and limits who gets to be in these spaces.

Globally, 50% of people are without social protection and 60% are in informal employment. We call for the financing and implementation of universal social protection, in line with ILO Convention 102, and Recommendation 202. It is urgent to uphold existing and new international labour standards on platform work and demand investments in the care economy that ensure fair pay, decent work, and access to services.

Technology cannot be left unregulated. We must uphold human oversight in algorithmic decision-making, especially in workplaces. We must embed circular economy principles, ensure energy and sourcing transparency in digital infrastructure, and regulate tech companies to uphold rights.

#### **On SDG 14:**

If our oceans die, we die.

Oceans — if they were a country — their income generation would make it the fifth largest economy. Yet they receive the least funding of all SDGs. 80% of ocean pollution comes from plastics, and 90% of plastic is used only once. This is a crisis of waste, greed, and inaction. War is polluting our seas and water supplies.

We urge all Member States to ratify the High Seas Treaty and to develop a global treaty to cap plastic production and end plastic pollution. Ocean literacy is for everyone — including landlocked countries.

## **On SDG 17:**

### **Multilateralism must mean inclusion.**

Yet civil society continues to face exclusion — from shrinking civic space and restrictive visa regimes to inaccessible venues and the absence of sign language interpretation. The latter barriers are in direct violation of the CRPD and undermine the UN's own Disability Inclusion Strategy.

Europe's colonial countries bear the burden of climate change, and continue with business as usual — extraction from countries abroad to fuel our “green growth”. Growth is never green. It depends on invisibilized, racialised and feminised labour.

**Let us be clear** — without adequate, accessible, and redistributive financing, there will be no just transition, no climate justice, and no meaningful implementation of the SDGs. The tools exist — what is lacking is political will. We call on Member States to commit to progressive taxation, regulate extractive capital and private tech, and centre feminist, community-led, and rights-based solutions.

**Care work, civic space, and climate justice** must be treated as core priorities — not optional add-ons. The green transition must not deepen inequality. It must dismantle it.

### **In closing,**

Civil society needs the UN, just as the UN needs civil society. We must not just survive these polycrises — we must transform them.

What gives us hope is that we are still here — organising, resisting, building, surviving. And not because it's easy, but because it's necessary.

Thank you.