

**Opening Statement by Mrs. Zakia Khattabi
Minister of Climate, the Environment, Sustainable Development and Green Deal
Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In October 2022, the European Commission published – as part of the Eurobarometer 2022 – their key findings on ‘Fairness perceptions of the green transition’. Let me quote: “A green transition that leaves no one behind: 88% of EU citizens support this goal. Yet only 46% of Europeans are currently confident that by 2050 sustainable energy, products and services will be affordable for everyone, including poorer people.” These figures are the reason we are here today.

At the moment of this publication, I was already working for more than a year setting the scene for a just transition in Belgium and pushing for ‘just transition’ to be one of the priorities of the Belgian EU presidency.

I believe that the triple crisis we are facing (climate crisis, loss of biodiversity and pollution) is not just an environmental issue: it is the social issue of this century; as it impacts differently and unfairly on countries and individuals alike, hitting the most vulnerable amongst us hardest, even though they are the least responsible for this crisis. We must therefore ensure that the transition, because it has not been prepared, does not have a negative impact on the same people, like a double penalty.

In my view transition is therefore also an imperative of justice; the transition will either be fair or will not be.

* * * * *

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the European Conference for a Just Transition, welcome to Belgium, welcome to Brussels.

Two important days await us and will be the occasion to discuss together the path which will lead us to a sustainable future. First of all, let me go through the program with you and provide you with some insights on the choices that I have made when scheduling the program.

The High-Level Segment this morning will start with two keynotes. It is important to me that mr. Moustapha Kamal Gueye, from the International Labour Organisation has agreed to be the first keynote speaker. Indeed, ILO is a tripartite organization which has played a pioneering role in setting the agenda for a just transition. Representatives from employers, trade unions and governments agreed and published in 2015 the 'Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all' which have been reflected in the Paris Agreement. Since that moment, the work at the ILO did continue, mr. Gueye will tell us more about it in a couple of minutes. Following him, the second keynote speaker is mrs. Leena Ylä-Mononen, Executive Director of the European Environmental Agency. With the work EEA has been doing on just transition for the last two years, more emphasis is laid on the importance of it for Europe and in the environment filière.

Next on the program is a presentation by the European Economic and Social Committee, as well a tripartite organization, but this time composed of employer organisations, trade unions and civil society : an important multistakeholder platform within the European Union. In recognition of the central role that social dialogue and participation play in just transition policies, it was crucial to engage the European social partners and civil society from the very outset of this journey. This is the reason why, just before summer 2023, I asked EESC to prepare an opinion on just transition. It consists of a rich and comprehensive document with 6 pillars and more than 70 recommendations wich has been presented to the ministers

during the informal Environment Council on 15 January 2024. For today I have asked the president of the EESC, mr. Oliver Röpke, and the rapporteur, mr. Rudy De Leeuw, to focus on the recommendations related to 'governance' when setting up a Just Transition Policy Framework within the European Union. After this presentation, I have invited member states, representatives from the Commission and the European institutions as well as organisations from the civil society that are represented at the highest level to come forward with a short intervention during a roundtable discussion.

Ladies and gentlemen, this afternoon we will focus in two break-out groups on 'poverty eradication' and on 'reconversion of industry'. If 'Leave No One Behind' is not an empty slogan, it is important to address huge challenges related to poverty, to involve the most vulnerable in our society. I am glad we could co-construct with their representatives, the European Anti-Poverty Network and their partners, the program for Break-out 1 – Poverty Eradication. But the LNOB-principle within the context of the so much needed ecological transition is as well related to enterprises, in particular small and medium sized enterprises, and employees: therefore I am grateful that the European Trade Union Confederation, Business Europe, IndustriAll and SME United accepted to actively participate in Breakout 2 – Reconversion of industrial sectors; I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Mrs. Boveda from DG Regio and Dr. Mandelli from SciencePo Paris for guiding these afternoon breakout sessions.

Tomorrow, I will take the liberty to present you briefly the ongoing work on just transition in Belgium, with a focus on the work of the scientific High Committee, and a wrap-up of today, it will be important for me to invite member states, institutions and organisations that are represented at the highest level, but were not in a position to share their thoughts today, to take the floor.

Next, and not least, listen very attentively to the presentation, in exclusivity, of the new study 'The European Green Deal and the Leave No One Behind principle: state of the art,

gaps and way forward' by dr. Sebastiano Sabato from the European Social Observatory. This study has been commissioned by the Presidency in order to assess the integration of social justice aspect in the different strategies of the European Green Deal and will provide some insights to continue its integration in the future. In the afternoon, we will set up an interaction with you, the participants, about the findings of this study.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to conclude with an important consideration. This European Conference for a Just Transition is not a stand-alone event. From our side, these two days, we are in a listening mode; we want to capture the most ambitious common ground to be reflected in Council Conclusions of June 2024 and to be resonated in the Strategic Agenda of the next European Commission. We will careful note of your interventions, be it here in the plenary or in the breakouts. Council Conclusions are by nature concise: be as short and sharp as possible in your interventions. If supported by others, you will have the most impact.

Ladies and gentlemen, I declare the European Conference for a Just Transition open.