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Talking points

by

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United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at the

In Focus: SDG 11

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Palais de Nations, Room XII

Distinguished guests,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to join you at this roundtable which reflects on the successes and challenges in building urban resilience, as a means of implementing *Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities* and other urban-related SDGs in the UNECE region and beyond. This year SDG11 Day is part of our celebrations for World Habitat Day ‘Housing For All — A Better Urban Future’ and Sustainable Cities week, addressing challenges and solutions for sustainable urban development for a resilient future.

My special gratitude goes to the Geneva Cities Hub and UN-Habitat for co-organizing this event and to our extended UN family here in Geneva that will have the opportunity to share their valuable experiences at this roundtable.

If there was any shadow of doubt that the access to affordable and adequate housing can be a matter of life or death, the COVID-19 outbreak eliminated it completely. While governments worldwide announced a lockdown in an attempt to contain the spread of the disease, staying at home was never an option for someone who has no home to begin with. Similarly, while regular hand washing and social distancing have proven to be effective in containing the spread of the virus, people living in overcrowded, informal settlements have not been able to practice them. The sad reality of our times, which this pandemic exposed in a particularly brutal manner, is that the notion of “safety of one’s home” simply does not apply to a huge percentage of the population.

But affordable and adequate housing is just one amongst many problems our cities face nowadays. Our cities are becoming warmer and less habitable, suffering from high levels of air pollution and traffic congestion. They are also vulnerable to natural disasters and marked by staggering income inequalities. The current pandemic made many of these acute issues more pronounced. There is no time to waste – we need to build back better – and to do that, we need a brave new agenda for our cities, which will take into account all complexities associated with urban governance.

For that reason, I am delighted that our that this year’s “SDG 11 Day” is focused on promoting and strengthening the cooperation between global city networks and UN organizations. This is really crucial, as city networks are now recognized as important new players in global governance. They facilitate knowledge sharing and encourage the development of innovative solutions, both of which are necessary to take on complex challenges of urban environments.

As many of you know, the UNECE has long history working in sustainable urban development, obtained through its work on affordable housing, energy efficiency in buildings and smart sustainable cities. In particular, sustainable and smart cities is one of the UNECE high-impact areas where multiple SDGs converge. The Smart Sustainable Cities for all Ages Nexus is one of four nexuses here at the UNECE where divisions work together and promote a cross-sectoral dialogue within the organization as well as with our partners.

We were also among the first UN bodies to recognize the importance of including mayors and local authorities in intergovernmental processes. This year's annual session of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management is preceded by the Forum of Mayors, which takes place tomorrow and will gather 42 mayors from 38 countries, from all over Europe, North America, Central Asia and the Caucasus. I am proud to say that this is the first time in history that we are inviting local governments to directly contribute to the intergovernmental discussions that take place here, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

Distinguished delegates and colleagues,

It is clearer than ever that, in order to meeting the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and especially SDG 11, we need to work with cities. 2030 is now just a decade away and there is no time to waste. UNECE remains open to cooperation and ready to embrace new partners, including, today, global city networks – so please accept my warm welcome to our own, UN network.

I wish you all a very dynamic and fruitful dialogue. I hope that this event will inspire us all to think about concrete ways in which we can strengthen our partnerships in this region and around the world, and in that way, try to imagine and create a bright new future for our cities.

Thank you.