

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Welcome address by

by

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Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

Day of Cities

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Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my privilege to welcome you to the Day of Cities. I am both honored and humbled that we are welcoming 40 cities from 33 member States, 50 Mayors and 411 participants here in Geneva today. Many of you will be joining us for the first time here in the historical Palais des Nations. Allow me to wish you a warm welcome to the United Nations - a birthplace of ideas that are changing the world, bringing peace to communities, and helping us build a more sustainable world.

Today, cities are at the forefront of such efforts. The world is experiencing unprecedented urban growth. By 2050, almost three quarters of the world's population will live in urban areas. This is an important trend: cities now serve as drivers of innovation and experimentation with the ideas that will form the basis for sustainable development. However, this pace of urbanization also brings challenges: housing shortages, increased air pollution, insufficient basic services and infrastructure, higher vulnerability to natural and climate change disasters, and others. These challenges are not limited to a single region, a country or a city. To confront them, we must work together. By coming here today, you have sent a clear message of your strong willingness to do so. I thank you all.

I also want to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to the City of Geneva and the government of Switzerland, for their generous support to the organization of this event.

We all acknowledge the need for joint action towards making our urban areas smarter, more resilient, sustainable hubs of innovation and competitiveness. What can, and should be done to reach this goal? The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is crucial in this regard. With its pledge to leave no one behind, is our boldest agenda for humanity.

UNECE is actively involved in supporting cities and human settlements and promoting urban sustainability, resilience and competitiveness. And we have the pleasure of working very closely on this topic with many of the cities represented today. For example, reflecting the belief of our member States that sustainable, affordable, and adequate housing is central to healthy and prosperous populations, Tallinn, Glasgow, Tirana and Vienna host Centers of Excellence which promote the principles of the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing. More centres are under way, to enhance the implementation of these principles and the exchange of relevant best practices. Securing land rights is also a key foundation to making cities and human settlements inclusive, resilient and sustainable. To that end, our Working Party on Land Administration acts as an international neutral platform for the exchange of knowledge and experiences related to land administration and management. Likewise, together with colleagues from the International Telecommunications Union, UNECE launched the “United for Smart Sustainable Cities” initiative. It has produced Key Performance Indicators which are now used by many cities across the world, to measure their progress towards becoming smarter and more sustainable. **Good data and monitoring are key to ensure that our policies are having the desired effect.**

Today's theme is "Smart and Sustainable Cities". It addresses a number of SDGs as a thematic cluster, which we call nexus area, and addresses them cross-sectorally. Building on SDG11, this nexus area addresses several urban development challenges. **If you have not already done so, I encourage you to consult the background document called "UNECE Toolbox", on the website for the 68th Commission session – it contains a listing of all the urban-related UNECE work that contributes to this nexus. Let me give just a few examples, which, I hope, will serve as inspiration for further action:**

- Our work on sound environment and human health in cities ensures that environmental and health considerations are taken into account in government plans on the use of natural resources such as forests, fossil fuels, mineral resources, water, renewable energy and land. This work also applies to local, urban governments.
- We promote coordination between industrial safety experts and land-use planning authorities: For effective decision-making on development proposals, and to prevent and minimize the effects of industrial accidents on people, environment and cultural heritage.
- In some urban areas, food waste makes up over half of the solid waste and creates a huge environmental, financial and social problem. With increasing migration and growing urban centers, this will be amplified even more. UNECE is working on developing smart food-loss solutions to quantify food lost, increase preventive measures and encourage the repurposing of food otherwise lost.

- Sustainable urban infrastructure and transport can save lives and are central to building more resilient, stronger communities. For this reason, a separate nexus on Sustainable Mobility and Smart Connectivity contributes to these efforts. The linkages are many and include: harmonizing processes and regulations; improving waste management; traceability of products coming into cities; accessible, safe and environmentally friendly mobility; fostering innovation; safe deployment of autonomous vehicles, promoting cycling, optimizing electronic data exchanges to improve the availability and quality of environmental information, and many others.
- Of course, implementing ideas like the ones I mentioned requires funds. But financing the urban infrastructure needed for the SDGs remains a key challenge for cities with shrinking budgets. This is where the private sector could play a key role in delivering public services and urban infrastructure through Public-Private Partnerships. If done correctly, this will have positive results benefitting all urban residents. For many years, UNECE has assisted governments, including at local level, to improve their PPP enabling environment through capacity building and PPP standards on transport, renewable energy, water and sanitation and so on.
- We should also not forget that cities are hit hardest by natural and man-made hazards, and play a crucial role both in preparing for and responding to emergencies. Several UNECE sub-programs work with cities to support the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Through its recommendations, treaties and best practice, UNECE plays a crucial role in disaster preparedness in its region and well beyond its boundaries. As complex, multi-dimensional systems, urban areas require

standards for interoperability of structures and services and reduction of adverse environmental impacts. By working in partnership with standards-setting organizations, UNECE ensures the integration of diverse technologies and systems, from different organizations and technology providers.

Our commitment to support urban sustainability is also reflected in the attention given to urban development at our meetings. Two weeks ago, we hosted the Regional Forum for Sustainable Development in the UNECE region. It highlighted that, to build sustainable cities, governments and the UN System should re-focus their activities towards effective support for SDG implementation. This includes a stronger focus on working with local stakeholders, including mayors and their deputies. So allow me to use this opportunity and encourage you to speak with us, share with us the experience of your city in achieving the SDGs. We want to hear about your achievements, current projects, future plans, but also your challenges. Our rapporteurs will feed this as an input into tomorrow's 68th Commission Session. This way, your valuable input will help us understand how better to support our member States and their cities.

I wish you a fruitful meeting. This event represents a great learning opportunity for all of us, a platform to build long-standing and fruitful partnerships; and the beginning of a journey towards better urban futures. Let us, therefore, work together to build smart, sustainable, innovative and livable cities of the future.

Thank you.