

MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

**ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES IN DISTRESSED URBAN AREAS
IN THE UNECE REGION**

**as adopted by Ministers and Heads of Delegation
at the Sixty-Seventh Session of the Committee on Housing and Land Management
on 19 September 2006**

Introduction

1. The physical environment is important for community cohesion and social interaction. While some UNECE countries have accumulated a wide range of experiences with socially oriented housing programmes and spatial planning practices, in many parts of the UNECE region disadvantaged and deteriorating neighbourhoods lag far behind. In many countries of the region, the upkeep of the multi-family housing stock is becoming ever more urgent, as this type of housing stock represents the majority of all dwellings. Effective integrated housing and land management policies accompanied by community development can help to foster supportive networks and relationships of trust.

Main issues

2. Until recently, it was usually in areas with a large concentration of the working poor and immigrants that social and community support systems were needed to maintain adequate living conditions and levels of social integration. Recently, however, areas of more extreme, multiple deprivations have emerged in many parts of the UNECE region. In some neighbourhoods, persistent high unemployment, poor housing and physical environments, low educational attainment, high crime rates and other socio-economic problems interact to generate decline and distress.

3. Shrinking public resources and the process of economic transformation, in particular in countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and South-Eastern Europe (SEE), pose considerable challenges to meeting the need for affordable and adequate housing. In many of these countries, the prevailing reliance on market forces has not been sufficiently complemented by governments' role in the housing sector. Often privatization of large segments of the multi-family housing stock, built mainly in the period 1960–1990, has created many problems for the new owner-occupants and the local governments in regard to management and maintenance.

4. Significant challenges have also been noticed in Western Europe. Structural economic changes and unemployment have led to urban segregation and the emergence of deprived neighbourhoods. Limited access to public and private services and decreasing human security pose serious challenges to residents. Tightening public budgets have resulted in less investment in social housing.

5. At the same time, the experiences of many countries have proved that a good land administration system guarantees ownership and security of all types of tenure; supports land and property taxation; provides security for credit; helps to develop and monitor land markets; facilitates the management of state-owned land; improves urban planning and infrastructure development; and provides statistical data in support of good governance.

6. Likewise, adequate spatial planning contributes to improving the local physical, social and economic environment; achieving more efficient patterns of spatial development; controlling urban sprawl; balancing urban expansion and urban regeneration; providing adequate location and provision of infrastructures and facilities; improving transport systems; and promoting participation and community involvement.

7. Informal settlements and distressed urban areas reflect a lack of planning and adequate housing policies. They are characterized by, and the result of, severe economic and social problems. The improvement of living conditions in informal settlements is one of the most complex and pressing challenges facing many UNECE countries today.

Therefore,

WE, MINISTERS AND HEADS OF DELEGATION ATTENDING THE SIXTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE UNECE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND LAND MANAGEMENT IN GENEVA ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2006,

Recalling, as is stated in the *UNECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the Twenty-First Century*, that social cohesion is a process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among the population,

Aware that a failure to establish a political, economic, social and physical environment conducive to a stable and adequate standard of living for all inhabitants of a country may contribute to higher societal costs; political instability; urban insecurity; ethnic conflicts; problems related to migrants, refugees and displaced persons; and the increase of marginalization of groups in society and homelessness, and might eventually threaten the strength of the economic system itself,

Noting that distressed urban areas continue to emerge, since governments have in several instances been too slow to implement policies to address challenges related to housing needs and economic development in such areas,

Convinced that in the context of current demographic trends in the UNECE region, which are characterized by ageing populations and by an increase in migratory movements, policies relating to social cohesion and security should be at the heart of government strategies,

Being also aware that such strategies often require significant changes in the working relations and distribution of responsibilities among all relevant levels of government and non-governmental bodies, as well as in promoting the setting up of effective public/private partnerships, including the strengthening of awareness of individual responsibility,

Recognizing that the management, maintenance and refurbishment of the multi-family housing stock has become a major problem in the UNECE region, one that implies considerable and imminent material and capital losses and social costs, while at the same time being an opportunity to improve the quality of life, increase community cohesion and strengthen the local economy,

Recognizing also that urban and spatial information systems should become increasingly open and public, from the highest level of government to the community level, in order to ensure equal access to reliable land and real property information to all people. This will facilitate land reform and the functioning of the real estate markets, facilitate the security of ownership and all forms of tenure, and improve spatial planning, infrastructure development and natural disaster prevention and mitigation efforts,

(i) *Reconfirm* that the goals and challenges contained in the *UNECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the Twenty-First Century* continue to be the basis for future programmes of work of the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management. This involves effective urban planning and management; the promotion of neighbourhood regeneration (mainly through integrated urban renewal programmes); the refurbishment of the multi-family housing stock; the promotion of access to affordable and adequate housing, infrastructure, facilities and public spaces; and thereby the sustainable improvement of the quality of life for all in the UNECE region;

(ii) *Commit* ourselves to contributing to social inclusion, through affordable housing development, taking into account the policy recommendations of the UNECE as contained in the *Country Profiles on the Housing Sector*, the *Guidelines on Social Housing* (2006) and other relevant UN recommendations agreed to by the UNECE member states; and through integrating housing policy with other policies, notably those in the areas of land administration, employment, migration, education and gender equality;

(iii) *Support* UNECE work on the implementation of housing finance policies for affordable housing, taking into account the UNECE publication *Housing Finance Systems for Countries in Transition* (2005);

(iv) *Stress* that the issue of effective management of large multi-family housing estates should be further addressed by the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management, taking into consideration the need for governments to develop integrated strategies. This entails maintenance, refurbishment, energy saving, rational consumption of land and water, waste

management, urban management, neighbourhood improvement, supporting the implementation of the UNECE *Guidelines on Condominium Ownership of Housing for Countries in Transition* (2003) and continuing work in this area;

(v) *Support* UNECE land management activities aimed at sustainable spatial planning, including issues related to illegal and unregulated construction, informal settlements, land reform and access to land for the poor, and a functioning real estate market through development of cadastral and land registration systems and modernization of spatial planning systems, noting that spatial planning at all relevant levels is crucial for achieving sustainable urban development;

(vi) *Emphasize* the importance of continuing the exchange of experiences regarding arrangements for public/private partnerships in the housing and land management sectors on the basis of transparent agreements for sharing risks and benefits, as well as the utilization of multi-sector skills and finance to serve the interests of the public and in particular disadvantaged groups within the population; and

(vii) *Decide* to convene the next high-level meeting in five years' time in order to assess progress in the implementation of the above commitments.