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Committee on Housing and Land Management

Working Group on a Possible Legally Binding Instrument on Affordable, Healthy and Ecological Housing in the UNECE Region

First meeting

Geneva, 11 – 12 April 2011

Report of the first meeting of the Working Group on a Possible Legally Binding Instrument on Affordable, Healthy and Ecological Housing in the UNECE¹ Region

I. Attendance

1. The first meeting of the Working Group on Affordable, Healthy and Ecological Housing in the UNECE Region was held on 11 and 12 April 2011 in Geneva.
2. Representatives of the following countries participated in the meeting: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey and Ukraine.
3. In attendance were representatives from the following intergovernmental organizations: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and World Health Organization.
4. The Chair of the Committee on Housing and Land Management, Mr. Wolfgang Förster (Austria), opened the meeting. The Director of the UNECE Trade and Sustainable Land Management Division welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of the main topics to be discussed by the Working Group.

¹ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

II. Election of officers (agenda item 1)

5. Mr. Wolfgang Förster (Austria) was elected as Chair of the Working Group and Ms. Elena Szolgayova (Slovakia) as Vice-chair.

III. Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 2)

6. The Working Group adopted its provisional agenda as contained in document ECE/HBP/AC.1/2011/1/Corr.1.

IV. An overview of UNECE work on affordable, healthy and ecological housing (agenda item 3)

7. The secretariat briefed the Working Group on UNECE work on affordable, healthy and ecological housing and presented a background document on “Principles and Goals for Affordable, Healthy and Ecological Housing” (ECE/HBP/2010/6), which outlined the major housing challenges in the region and provided the rationale for the development of a UNECE-wide comprehensive policy framework. The secretariat emphasized that the proposed set of principles and goals could serve as the basis for integrating the implementation of housing policy guidelines and recommendations, developed by UNECE, under a single comprehensive international framework.

8. Participants were also presented with a video on energy efficiency in housing in the region, prepared by United Nations Television in collaboration with the UNECE secretariat.

9. In the discussion that followed, member States acknowledged the importance of addressing the issues in a comprehensive manner and welcomed the background document as a summary of principles and goals to tackle major housing challenges in the region. They also raised a number of key issues which are presented in the Chair’s summary under agenda item 5.

V. Role of legally binding instruments in addressing international problems (agenda item 4)

10. A keynote presentation briefed the Working Group on the effectiveness of existing international agreements in facilitating international cooperation, and outlined the rationale for and value added of a UNECE-wide instrument to address common challenges in the housing sector.

11. In the ensuing discussion, delegations exchanged views on the feasibility of such an instrument, including their concern about the instrument addressing the issue of affordability as there was some concern about how a convention addressing this topic might impact existing policies at the national level. Opinions varied on the benefits and drawbacks of a possible legally binding instrument. While a number of delegations highlighted the importance of developing a framework convention to address challenges in the housing sector in the region, some delegations took a critical view with respect to a legally binding instrument at UNECE level in the light of the differences in national and even regional housing markets. Moreover, it was indicated that a clearer definition of affordable, healthy and ecological housing would facilitate the discussion on this topic. Some countries stressed the lack of a policy framework at the national level, including clear objectives and targets for the housing sector.

VI. Key issues to be addressed by the Working Group (agenda item 5)

12. The main results of a survey conducted among the members of the Working Group were presented. The synthesis document highlighted major gaps in ensuring access to affordable, healthy and ecological housing in several countries, outlined member States' views on the added value and drawbacks of a possible legally binding instrument and its role in addressing the existing gaps, and identified a range of potential factors that could hinder the implementation of such an instrument.

13. The ensuing discussion was based on member States' replies to the questionnaire and reflected their experience and needs, including challenges encountered and examples of best practices in addressing these challenges. Representatives of the following member States made presentations: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Montenegro, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Ukraine.

14. Based on discussions held under agenda items 3, 4 and 5, the Chair presented a summary of the main points to be further reflected in a revised version of the synthesis document which would be considered at the next Working Group meeting. In particular, he noted the following:

- There was a need to build a common understanding of the scope of the issues to be addressed in a possible UNECE-wide instrument and develop clear definitions of affordable, healthy and ecological housing.
- A number of countries had developed effective legislation and technical standards on affordable, healthy and ecological housing. However, some of them cited weak implementation of existing legislation and the need to identify why implementation was lagging behind.
- A linkage between affordability of and accessibility to housing was highlighted and suggested to be reflected in the updated document. There was also a lack of a common definition of housing affordability and cost effectiveness in housing.
- It was suggested that future discussions on a possible instrument should address issues such as sustainable urban planning, stability of real estate markets and the role of housing finance systems, particularly mortgage finance.
- Some countries highlighted a linkage between ecological and affordable housing and expressed the view that ecological housing could sometimes be more expensive. In this regard, it was suggested to reflect in the updated document such issues as the need for cost-effective standards for building components, life-cycle cost analysis of buildings and the use of local materials to decrease the cost of new buildings.
- The overall definition of ecological housing should not be seen only in terms of energy efficiency but also include issues related to sustainable urban development, as well as waste and water management. There was also a need to take a balanced approach to preserve cultural heritage when retrofitting old buildings.
- There was an interest in addressing such issues as safety aspects of housing, particularly in disaster-prone areas, and the principle of universal design.
- There was a need to facilitate data and knowledge sharing and exchange of experience and best practices.

VII. Mobilization of resources in support of the Working Group (agenda item 6)

15. Delegations were informed that the work on affordable, healthy and ecological housing, as well as ensuring equal participation of experts from all over the region in the meetings of the Working Group, relied on voluntary extrabudgetary contributions provided by donors. Member States were thus invited to contribute to support wider participation of delegates from countries with economies in transition.

VIII. Other business (agenda item 7)

16. The dates for the next meeting of the Working Group were tentatively established as 4-6 July 2011. The Chair suggested that the meeting could run for one or one and a half days. The exact dates of the meeting would be communicated by the secretariat in due course.

IX. Closing of the first meeting (agenda item 8)

17. Following the discussions held by the Working Group and requests from the floor, the Chair asked the secretariat to start preparations for the next meeting and provide the relevant documents including:

- (a) An updated version of the synthesis document based on the outcomes of the first meeting which would integrate those issues reflected in the Chair's summary;
- (b) A note that would provide information on the structure of a Framework Convention to address housing issues, including some sample provisions.

18. The Chair also emphasized the importance of ensuring continuity of participation in the Working Group and encouraged delegates to attend its next meeting.

19. The meeting was closed at 5 p.m. on 12 April 2011.
