



# Economic and Social Council

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## Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Housing and Land Management

### Working Group on a Possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing in the UNECE Region

**Third meeting**

Geneva, 3 April 2012

## Report of the third meeting of the Working Group on a Possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing in the UNECE<sup>1</sup> Region

### Attendance

1. The third meeting of the Working Group on a Possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing in the UNECE Region (hereafter referred to as the Working Group) was held on 3 April 2012 in Geneva.
2. Representatives of the following countries participated in the meeting: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.
3. Also in attendance were representatives from intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as from academia and the private sector.
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 some of the challenges encountered in the area of sustainable housing in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

## **I. Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 1)**

5. The Working Group adopted its provisional agenda as contained in document ECE/HBP/AC.1/2012/1.

## **II. Summary of outcomes of previous meetings of the Working Group and decisions taken at the seventy-second session of the Committee on Housing and Land Management (agenda item 2)**

6. The Chair summarized the outcomes of previous meetings of the Working Group, as well as the decisions taken by the Committee on Housing and Land Management regarding the mandate and work of the Working Group. In September 2010, the Committee established the Working Group to explore the potential added value of a possible legally binding instrument addressing housing issues<sup>2</sup>.

7. In 2011 the Working Group met twice to discuss challenges in the housing sector in the UNECE region and to consider whether a possible framework convention could address those issues. Based on these discussions, the Working Group produced two reports, which were presented to the Committee at its seventy-second session, in October 2011.

8. After discussing these reports, the Committee decided to extend the mandate of the Working Group “to continue its work in 2012 to develop the scope (subject and geographical coverage), and objective(s) of a possible framework convention on sustainable housing”<sup>3</sup> in the UNECE region. It also decided to change the name of the “Working Group on a possible legally binding instrument on affordable, healthy and ecological housing” to the current name.

9. The secretariat summarized the main areas of work of the Committee that address the challenges related to sustainable housing.

10. Two keynote speakers then delivered presentations on those challenges. The presentations focused on issues encountered in both the western and eastern countries of the region. The economic, environmental and social challenges highlighted included:

- Housing affordability and accessibility.
- Disparity in access to basic utilities and sanitation across the region.
- Need for improvement in the energy efficiency of the housing stock.
- Increasing housing shortages and poor housing conditions.

11. In the ensuing debate, delegations welcomed the two presentations and shared views on the challenges. Member States highlighted the need to address issues such as:

- Maintaining and refurbishing the existing housing stock and, for some countries, in particular the challenges connected to the existence of many condominiums with “poor owners”, and the general issue of “poor owners”.
- The role of the State in assisting its citizens to improve their housing conditions.
- Poor energy efficiency and excessive carbon dioxide emissions from housing.
- Energy poverty.

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<sup>2</sup> Report of the Committee on Housing and Land Management on its seventy-first session.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Committee on Housing and Land Management on its seventy-second session.

- Good legislative and political frameworks to support and encourage private investment in the housing sector.
- The correlation between housing conditions and health.
- Stable and well-functioning real-estate markets.

12. The main conclusions of the presentations were for the housing sector to be considered as a driving force for sustainable development, and the need for a general framework agreement to support the sector in this role.

### **III. Discussion on objectives and scope of a Possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing (agenda item 3)**

13. The secretariat presented an informal document to the meeting, containing examples for the objectives and scope of a Possible Framework Convention, which had been prepared in consultation with the Bureau of the Committee.

14. The secretariat described the structure of the document and its objective, which was to facilitate the discussions under this agenda item by first explaining the role of objectives and scope in framework conventions and, second, by providing a tentative list of examples of possible objectives and scope. The examples took into account the various housing challenges discussed at the previous meetings of the Working Group, and were not for negotiation as they were only to provide an indicative overview of possible options.

15. The secretariat explained that framework conventions usually contain provisions that set out the policy objectives intended to guide the actions of the parties and that the objectives are, in fact, the intended impact that countries would like a convention to have. As regards the scope of a convention, it is the general, overarching element, which applies to the treaty as a whole. Usually, the notion of the scope of a convention integrates two main components-geographic coverage and subject.

16. In the ensuing debate, delegations exchanged views on the possible areas that a framework convention could cover, and its goal. Some highlighted the role that it could serve by providing member States with general overarching principles to guide their housing policies. It was suggested that a framework convention should be formulated in a general and declarative way without imposing detailed targets on Governments.

#### **Objectives**

17. It was noted that the examples provided in the informal note were accurate and reflected well the shared challenges in the region. Another topic highlighted as a potential objective to be addressed in a framework convention was the definition of tenure, but the general opinion was that this topic should be avoided. Other possible topics that were raised included informal housing, security of tenure and legalization of human settlements. The list of other areas discussed by the Working Group is as follows:

- Accessible and affordable housing.
- Energy poverty.
- Housing resilience both to natural disasters and potential financial crises.
- Urban systems and urban management.

18. At previous meetings of the Working Group, the question of whether affordable housing should be addressed in a framework convention was the main diverging point between countries. This was the main reason that the Working Group could not decide in 2011 whether or not to recommend to the Committee to develop a framework convention. The Working Group considered that the way the examples were presented in the informal note was

useful in moving towards an agreement on the possible benefits of a convention. As there was a general consensus on the relevance of the elements contained in this document, the Chair suggested that the additional, identified areas be listed and presented separately to the Committee as topics that it could use when planning its future activities. The Working Group welcomed this proposal.

19. Overall, it was agreed that a framework convention should have broad objectives addressing the three pillars (economic, environmental and social) of sustainable housing. The question of how these areas should be addressed would be a matter for the actual negotiations, if the Committee were to decide to start negotiations on a framework convention.

20. There was a consensus that a convention should formulate general and shared aims. This would allow Governments to have the discretion to decide on how to achieve these goals based on their capabilities. It was noted that setting up these objectives is crucial for providing housing for future generations and for the successful sustainable development of countries in the region.

#### **Scope - Geographical Coverage**

21. The geographical coverage would be the UNECE region. However, a concern was expressed about the reference in some of the examples to “particularly in the countries with economies in transition” since it was considered that all member States could benefit from this framework. Therefore, the Working Group agreed that such references should be avoided.

#### **Scope - Subject**

22. There was some discussion about having a broader scope than just housing, a scope that would take into account subjects interlinked with housing such as sustainable communities, transport and job creation. In the end there was overall agreement to recommend the narrower focus on housing to the Committee. In particular, after discussion, the Working Group considered the text as formulated in example 2 of the informal documents, which reads “to improve the sustainability of the housing sector in the UNECE region”, as the option to be recommended.

### **IV. Conclusions and next steps (agenda item 4)**

23. The Working Group agreed to provide the Committee with a general recommendation on the scope. There was overall consensus on the objectives presented in the informal note. The secretariat was requested to also present to the Committee a separate list containing other issues that were raised by the Working Group without adding them to the note as examples of objectives (see annex 1). The Working Group further suggested that the Committee may wish to consider these topics in its future work.

24. The secretariat was also requested to prepare an overview document summarizing the results of the three meetings of the Working Group as well the decisions of the previous Committee sessions related to the development of a Possible Framework Convention. The Working Group requested that this document be presented as a background paper for discussion by the Committee at its seventy-third session to be held in September 2012, along with the following conclusions:

**After a constructive discussion, the Working Group recognized the added value of a framework convention on sustainable housing as a possible instrument to address housing issues in the UNECE region and recommends to the Committee on Housing and Land Management to consider its development favorably.**

**The Working Group considered that such a framework convention should provide member States with guiding principles and, therefore:**

- **Agreed that a possible framework convention on housing could have the following scope: to improve the sustainability of housing in the UNECE**

region through effective policies and actions at all levels, supported by international cooperation and with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in the region;

- Recommended to the Committee on Housing and Land Management to consider the informal note on objectives and scope of a possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing when deciding on its possible development.

## **V. Mobilization of resources in support of the Working Group (agenda item 5)**

25. Delegations were informed that, since the Working Group had come to a consensus and, therefore, a fourth meeting would not take place, for the moment no further contribution would be needed to support this area of work.

26. Delegations were then invited to contribute to support other areas of the work of the Committee as presented under agenda item 2 and, in particular, the Country Profile studies on housing and land management.

## **VI. Other business (agenda item 6)**

27. The Chair reminded the participants at the Working Group meeting that a seminar on Greening Homes was to be held the next day.

## **VII. Closing of the meeting (agenda item 7)**

28. The Chair announced that the report of this meeting would be prepared as soon as possible, together with the background note summarizing all relevant meetings and both would be sent to the members of the Working Group.

## **Annex 1**

### **Other topics discussed at the Working Group on a Possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing to be reported to the Committee on Housing and Land Management included:**

- Accessibility to housing
- Universal Design
- Informal settlements
- Security of tenure
- Homeownership
- Energy poverty and energy standards
- Resilience to natural disasters
- Interdependent urban systems
- Sustainable communities
- Integrated approach to quality of housing

This list was discussed and approved at the third meeting of the Working Group on a Possible Framework Convention on Sustainable Housing and it was suggested that these and other topics as proposed by members of the Working Group could be considered by the Committee in the planning of its future activities.

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