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Speaking points

Mr. Christian Friis Bach

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

Seventy-fifth session of the Committee on Housing and Land Management

Palais des Nations, Room XII, Wednesday, 8 October 2014, 10:10-10:30

- I am pleased to welcome you to the seventy-fifth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's Committee on Housing and Land Management.
- More than 140 people have registered to attend, including representatives from 40 countries and a wide range of representatives from international partners, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies.
- You are here in order to discuss how to improve housing and land management in our region and beyond. In spite of progress during recent decades, a wide range of challenges related to housing and land management still remain and I would like to highlight the following challenges that you will be discussing during the next two days.
 - Social and affordable housing
 - Energy efficiency
 - Sustainable urban development
 - The Post-2015 Development Agenda
 - Adoption of The ECE Charter on Sustainable Housing
- **First, Social and affordable housing**

Housing is a basic need; especially in temperate regions with harsh winters. It is also a human right that should be available to all. However, it is the least affordable human right of all.

According to a survey conducted by UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management survey in 2012, access to affordable housing is one of the main challenges for the countries in the UNECE region.

By a conservative UNECE estimate, at least 100 million people in the region are overburdened with housing costs. This means that they spend more than 40% of their income on housing. This underlines the need for social housing to be among the top priorities for both transition-economies and developed market countries. For example, in 2014, there are more than 1.8 million households waiting for social housing in England; 1.7 million applications for social housing in France; and in the United States

there is a shortage of approximately 5.3 million social housing units.

One of the 15 objectives of the UNECE Strategy on Housing and Land Management for 2014 to 2020, which was adopted at last year's Ministerial Meeting, is to improve access to adequate, affordable, good-quality, healthy and secure housing and utility services. At this session we will hear about the implementation of this objective from the representatives of several countries.

- **Second, Energy efficiency**

Housing has a great impact on the environment. The building sector accounts for 33 per cent of final energy consumption in the region and almost 40 per cent of CO2 emissions from combustion.

In this context, the UNECE region is a major stakeholder in international climate and energy policy discussions. While the region has less than 20 per cent of the world's population, it is responsible for 45 per cent of energy consumption and 40 per cent of greenhouse gases emissions. That is why reforming the building sector in the UNECE region is essential if the region is to "do its part" in mitigating climate change.

Energy efficiency in housing not only reduces greenhouse-gas emissions, it also helps keep energy bills down. This is important if we are to overcome energy poverty, which is created when households have to pay disproportionate amounts of their income to pay for heating and is an important issue across Europe.

(To share the personal example here of installing new windows in his house.)

Today at 1 pm outside the Bar of Delegates on this floor, we will present an exhibit on energy efficient technologies for buildings called, "Greener and smarter homes." This exhibit is hosted by UNOG in cooperation with the UNECE Housing and Land Management Unit. The exhibit is supported by the local energy producer "Services Industriels de Genève" (SIG) and the European Association of local authorities in energy transition "Energy Cities". Energy Cities will also showcase some interesting statistics, based on data received from UNOG on past and present energy consumption in this building, while the SIG will demonstrate interactive examples of energy efficient technologies in buildings.

The exhibit also includes a section on your work which shows that energy efficiency is possible and happening. UNECE supports the transition to energy efficiency through the: analysis of best practices; the elaboration of an Action Plan for Energy-Efficient Housing in the UNECE Region; the development of other relevant studies and hopefully a study on standards related to energy efficiency in buildings. A proposal for developing such a study will be presented to the Committee during this session.

- **Third, Sustainable urban development, including informal settlements, and “smart cities”**

The built areas within the region covered by the UNECE contains less than a fifth of the world’s population and is characterized by a high level of urbanization. Urban residents represent more than 73 per cent of the region’s population and by 2050 the figure is estimated to rise to 85 per cent. This high level of urbanization presents a serious challenge for sustainable development.

Urbanization is often uncontrolled, creating and expanding informal settlements, whose residents may lack security of tenure and social and physical infrastructure. The number of illegalities worsened considerably in the early 1990s as result of political and economic changes in Eastern Europe and ex-Soviet countries. As a result, so-called formalization measures have been developed and implemented continuously by governments in a not always successful attempt to address this situation.

A recent study in Southern Europe by the UNECE and the International Federation of Surveyors shows that informal urban development remains a challenge there.

For instance, in 2012:

- In Albania, approximately USD 6 to 8 billion was invested in informal constructions;
- In Cyprus, the Government expects that about 80 per cent of existing condominiums (which is around 42 per cent of the existing dwelling stock in the country) suffers from informalities; and
- In Greece, approximately one fifth (or more than 1 million) of buildings are informal and built without building permits, while another 1.5 million additional properties have minor informalities.

Policy guidelines and recommendations to help address this informal development are

provided in the study.

Another urbanization issue which needs to be addressed in the region is the “shrinking” of cities, where some cities become depopulated. This declining urban population requires less land and creates a reduced tax base for local governments who then have problems in providing basic services.

At the same time, innovative approaches to urban development have the potential to become the driving force underpinning sustainable development. Much attention in this context has been devoted in recent years to the topic of smart urban planning and to “smart cities”. There are many definitions of what is a “smart city” and I like, in particular, the definition given by Smart Cities Switzerland: *“A smart city offers its inhabitants maximal life quality with minimal consumption of resources, based on an intelligent interconnection of infrastructure (transport, energy, communication etc.) on different hierarchic levels (building, districts, city)”*.

“Smart city” initiatives embody several elements, including the introduction of energy-efficient and health-friendly ways of working, travelling and building including “green” public transportation and smartly organized traffic flows. Trying to promote these ideas, I try to provide a personal example by biking to work regularly, and today during the presentation of the energy-efficient exhibition I will prove it once again. Come and see to find out how.

In 2012, the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management decided to include “smart cities” as one of its priority activities in its programme of work for 2014 – 2015 under the cluster “Sustainable urban development”. During this session you will be informed on the implementation of activities in this area.

- **Fourth, you will look at the Post-2015 Development Agenda**

The Rio+20 UN Conference highlighted the importance of promoting affordable, healthy and environmentally friendly housing and access to basic services. As a result, one of the main outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference was the agreement by member States to launch a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The proposal for SDGs was released just a few months ago and the proposed Goal 11 (among 17 SDGs) is to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and

sustainable.

During this discussion you will discuss how the Committee could contribute to implementing such a goal. You will also discuss contributions that you could make to the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in 2016 which will be an important milestone in the global discussions on housing and urban development.

- **Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, during this session we hope that you will agree on the ECE Charter on Sustainable Housing** that the Committee on Housing and Land Management, a goal that the Committee has been working towards for over four years now. The approval of a Charter is coming at just the right time because it has the potential to support this global discussion on sustainable housing and urban development.

In particular, we believe that formally approving the Charter during this Committee session could provide important support to the post 2015-development agenda in the area of Sustainable Human Settlements.

At the UNECE, we believe that the ECE Charter on Sustainable Housing will be an indispensable tool for advancing dialogue and the policies for sustainable housing.

Approval of the Charter will help member States in developing national laws, programmes, strategies and policies. It will serve as a basis for coordinating actions and provide a framework to evaluate and compare programmes and results. It will also strengthen the implementation of existing ECE housing guidelines, policy recommendations, action plans and other documents.

The Charter will also provide an opportunity for the Committee to assist countries with implementation by developing relevant principles, goals, measures and guidelines to address key housing issues. In particular, I would like to invite the Committee, as part of its follow-up, to consider what standards will be needed to support implementation of the Charter on sustainable housing at a national and regional level.

In conclusion, it is my sincere hope that, based upon the many consultations that have taken place over the last four years, this meeting will be ready to approve the Charter

and pass it on to the UNECE Executive Committee for final adoption.

- I look forward to working with all of you in the days and years to come, in order to achieve better housing and land management throughout our region. Thank you.
