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Statement

by

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**Workshop “The future of social housing: environmental and social challenges
and the way ahead”**

Palais des Nations, 10:00, 4 February 2014

Distinguished guests,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to open the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe workshop, “The future of social housing: environmental and social challenges and the way forward”.

We all know that housing is a basic need, and thus, is a critical factor which determines the quality of life of the population. Adequate and affordable housing constitutes a fundamental right which is recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international documents, as well as by national constitutions. The lack of, or uneven access to, adequate and affordable housing, is an aspect of inequality that needs to be seriously addressed.

According to the 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.

Lack of affordable housing is due to several factors:

- More than 30 years of deregulation and privatization of the social housing stock in Western Europe and privatization of public housing in transitional economies have considerably reduced the availability of social and economic instruments addressed to the needs of poor and vulnerable groups;
- Growing economic disparities in the region resulted in low affordability of

housing for young people and other vulnerable groups of the population;

- Economic crisis affected medium income earners with mortgage debt, resulting in an increased rate of default, foreclosure and, consequently, homelessness;
- Responding to the economic crisis with austerity measures reduced investments in social housing.

The economic crisis requires new innovative policy instruments and approaches to ensure the provision of affordable housing.

This workshop will provide a solid platform for identifying actions required and for exchanging views and information on best practices in different countries.

The UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management has been very active in the field of affordable and energy efficient housing. In 2006, the Committee adopted the *Guidelines for Social Housing*. These guidelines are very much a relevant tool that is used by countries still today.

The Committee also organized a series of international meetings, including a workshop on social housing in Central and Eastern Europe in 2008 and a workshop on affordable housing in CIS countries in Minsk in 2011.

The UNECE Ministerial Meeting on Housing and Land Management, held in October last year, discussed progress in the implementation of the commitments undertaken by member States and defined policy directions for UNECE's future work in housing, urban development and land management. At this meeting, attended by Ministers and other high-level participants from 47 countries in the

region, the *Strategy for Sustainable Housing and Land Management in the ECE Region for the Period 2014-2020* was adopted.

One of the 15 objectives of the adopted Strategy is to improve the access to adequate, affordable, good-quality, healthy and secure housing and utility services. Other objectives relevant to our workshop are:

- To reduce the impact of the residential sector on the environment, taking into account the life cycle of buildings;
- To improve the access of persons with disabilities to barrier-free housing;
- To reduce energy use in the housing sector as compared to 2012 and continue this downward trend;
- To ensure investment in innovation and research, with particular attention to energy savings, social innovation, green, compact, inclusive and smart cities.

The provision of social housing could offer an opportunity not only for the improvement of social and living conditions, but also for the reduction of greenhouse emissions and energy consumption at a national level, thus reducing the significant negative environmental impacts associated with the building sector. This is only possible if climate-neutral and energy-efficient policies are developed in parallel with social housing policies.

In this context, the UNECE region is a major stakeholder in international climate and energy policies. It has less than 20 per cent of the world's population but is responsible for the 60 per cent of the world's gross domestic product, 45 per cent of energy consumption and 40 per cent of greenhouse gases emissions. That is the foundation of the current transition towards a low-energy, low-carbon and highly

resilient development.

Reforming the building sector in the UNECE region is essential to mitigate climate change. Buildings consume energy both in the manufacturing and transport of building materials and in the construction, operation and demolition of the building. I am glad that this workshop will also address how social housing can be more energy efficient, healthy, and environmentally sustainable during the second day of the workshop. It is important to address challenges together, benefitting from possible synergies between social and environmental solutions.

Without doubt, this workshop will promote further policy discussion on affordable, healthy and environmentally sustainable housing and we look forward to it!

Thank you for coming here today and I wish you a productive workshop.